

CREATING SPACES

2020

**A collection of the winning writings of the 2020 writing
competition entitled *Creating Spaces: Giving Voice to the
Youth of Southwest and West Central Minnesota***

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<p>Note to Readers: Some of the works in <i>Creating Spaces</i> may not be appropriate for a younger reading audience.</p>

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POETRY
Grades 3 & 4

Kamron Kellenberger
Steen, MN
1st Place

Robbers and Thieves

Robbers are thieves that steal my meals and break my heels.
They steal my good beef, which makes me weep.
Now I have to eat my sheep.
But they stole my sheep.

Galaxie Penner
Mountain Lake, MN
2nd Place

Snow

Snow is white
It is smooth as silk
It sparkles in the light
And looks like milk

Snow is a habitat for animals
Polar bears, arctic wolves, bobcats,
Tigers, penguins, rabbits, seals, narwals,
Arctic foxes, squirrels, hares, skunks, and yaks

A snowman is fun to build
We'll make a tunnel, too
Now we slide down the hill
For sleeping outside we need an igloo

Emma Fosso
Raymond, MN
3rd Place

Turquoise

Turquoise is the sky, coral, and a shirt.

Turquoise tastes like the sea.

Turquoise smells like flowers.

Turquoise feels like water.

Turquoise looks like winter.

Turquoise makes me happy.

Turquoise is pretty.

FICTION
Grades 3 & 4

Ezra Petersen
Mountain Lake, MN
1st Place

Jorge the Mexican Mole Lizard's Adventure

Hi, I am Jorge, the Mexican mole lizard. I live in New York, and before you stop and say, “No way, José! You said you are from Mexico!” Well, I am, but I migrated here on the back of some guy named Juan. Here I am in New York City with my friends and my Mexican restaurant. I am an extraordinary size of nine-point-four inches and my magnífico restaurant is about three feet long and has a surprising resemblance to a cardboard box (well, except for the bathrooms, they look like tuna cans because, well, they are tuna cans).

A few years ago, I was walking down the street to buy some ingredients and supplies for my restaurant. I stocked up on tortillas, meat, and spices. I was also running low on gas for my gas stove. I paid for the things with a penny I found on the ground. When I got back, I was just cooking my enchiladas in peace when Mr. Floofer, the bunny, came barging in screaming. I immediately put my enchiladas on low because nobody likes burnt enchiladas, and then I asked, “What’s all the ruckus about?”

He said the one thing I thought he would never say. The exterminators were coming down the street! Faster than I could blink, Mr. Floofer asked if all of our amigos could come inside to hide out. I said, “Yes,” and then, sure enough, everybody I knew (except the scary dogs and cats) piled in my restaurant. Then, I did what every other Mexican mole lizard would do. I offered them some delicious enchiladas.

The place was hopping, literally. Mr. and Mrs. Floofer were hopping like crazy. I was making enchiladas,

quesadillas, and burritos while my friends Antonio the turtle, Mr. and Mrs. Floofer, Noah the mole, Frederick the squirrel, and Simon the mouse socialized in my restaurant. Our fiesta was followed by a serious meeting to “taco ‘bout” what to do with the exterminators.

We agreed we needed more information. Naturally, we sent Noah the mole as our spy, and off he went down the street as fast and as stealthy as he could. He returned to us with the town gossip. Somebody named Jim called the exterminators because my restaurant was on his property and now he wants to shut me down! Jim and the exterminator showed up while Noah was filling us in on his discoveries. I peeked my head out of the restaurant and said, “Hola, Amigos,” and with that began our attack. I thought fast and tripped Jim, while Mr. Floofer karate kicked the exterminator’s shin. Frederick quickly climbed a tree and jumped at the exterminator’s face, and Antonio snagged his shoe as he was trying to run. The exterminator fell right into Jim, and they both fell into the pond! “Now is our time!” I yelled at the top of my lungs. Antonio jumped on Mr. Floofer’s back because well, Antonio’s a turtle. The rest of us all tried to push my restaurant to a safe place.

The next few days, we laid low to avoid being found, but eventually, we had to venture out to get some food. We thought we were sneakily snacking when a woman scooped my friends and me up and locked us in different cages. She brought us to a place full of other animals, and like I dreaded, it was a pet store. I was traumatized for the next few weeks because all I did was sit there on display. A lizard needs his privacy, people!

Loneliness was really setting in when one morning, a family with a dad, a mom, an older brother, and a little sister walked into the pet store happily. The family looked very nice, and I actually wanted them to adopt all of us. The

family walked around the store and started putting things in their cart. The things they put in their cart looked delicious. Later the family went into a room and signed some papers and then shook hands with the lady that brought me here.

The family and the lady started to walk towards us anxiously. Next thing I knew, we all were adopted. It was amazing to have a family of my own but so sad because I wouldn't be free anymore.

When we arrived at my new home, the boy named John put me in a glass tank. I was petrified. What's with humans always staring at us? The next few days were nice but boring. I daydreamed about my freedom, and I realized that I might never see Mr. and Mrs. Floofer again and maybe not even Frederick the squirrel. I later heard that the family kept Frederick the squirrel as an all-family pet in another part of the house, and I was glad because if the little girl had Fredrick in her room, she would dress him up like a princess. We all know squirrels hate clothes, especially dresses.

One day the family went on a short vacation and left us alone. I wanted to see my friends, so I popped the top of my glass tank off and climbed out. As I was walking down the hall, I saw Fredrick, the squirrel about to be devoured by a giant mastiff! No one told me a dog lived here, too! I started running towards the dog while yelling. "GET OFF OF MY FRIEND." Surprisingly, the dog backed off and said, "Okay" in an obedient voice. I never knew I was a dog whisperer! I ran over to see if my friend was okay. He said he was, but I could tell he was shaken up. I later went into the girl's room, where I saw the Floofer couple. That night I had a hard time getting back into my glass tank, but I did it.

The next two months were awesome. John played with me and even made me my own restaurant! I assume the lady at the pet store told the family I was a well-known chef. My

life didn't turn out as I expected, but I was the happiest Mexican Mole Lizard in history.

Just when I thought things couldn't get better, my family came home one day with another hot tamale of a mole lizard. Her name is Guaca-mole. Oh, and we did live happily ever after. The end.

Jorge then closed the book.

"No Papa, no, don't stop the story," his son Luis said.

"But I don't have anything else to say. Well, except for..."

Lindsey Setrum
Raymond, MN
2nd Place

The Journey for Freedom

“Vairly,” Mom called, “Breakfast is ready!” Vairly awoke to the smell of eggs, sausage, and pancakes. “I’m coming!” Vairly yelled. When she got downstairs, breakfast was on the table. “Thanks Mom,” she called.

As she ate, her mom walked up behind her and asked her, “Do you want to go for our walk now?”

“Sure!” Vairly answered cheerfully. As they went on their daily walk, Vairly looked at the mountainside and saw smoke. “Look at the smoke. That can’t be a hikers bonfire!” Vairly told her mom.

“You’re right,” her mom agreed. “Should we get the Fire Tamers?” her mom asked.

“Yeah I think we should,” Vairly agreed.

When the Fire Tamers finally got there the fire had gotten bigger. The Fire Tamers were using the strongest of their water spouts. Everyone was confused when the Fire Tamers came back *and* the fire wasn’t out. One of them explained that it was an Everflame. Someone asked what an Everflame was. Another Fire Tamer explained that an Everflame was a flame that never went out and would go on forever.

Everflames are rare sights but a bad sign. Only the strongest wizards can make them. The wizards that could make them were Hasick, Veetho, Mayoveth, and last Garvon. But it wouldn’t make sense since Garvon was a friend to Vairly and her mom. So that narrowed it down to three, Hasick, Mayoveth, and Veetho.

“Cross off Hasick, he lives halfway across the world. Veetho is off battling Garvon, so it has to be...Mayoveth! It has to be Mayoveth!” Vairly told her mom.

After she explained, her mom answered, “You are so smart!”

They went home to pack for the journey to Mayoveth’s land. Vairly almost forgot her luck charm. It was her only token of her

dad. He had disappeared in war several years ago. He had an identical charm. When they were on the road, Vairly was excited but scared. They voyaged through the Death Woods (which really wasn't as bad as it sounds), across Peace River, and into Mayoveth's territory.

"Shhhhh!" her mom hushed her as they got closer to an old building. "We have to get up the stairs to the west wing past the prison and into Mayoveth's quarters."

Together, they quietly climbed the stairs. As they passed the prison, Vairly saw the exact same luck charm on a prisoner. "Mom, look," Vairly whispered. She heard her mom gasp.

"Jonathan?" her mom asked. "Is that you?"

"Mallory?" a male voice responded.

"Jonathan, it's you! We will come back for you, I promise." her mom told him.

They went past the rest of the prison, up another flight of stairs, and into Mayoveth's quarters. Slowly, they walked through an open door. There sat the one and only Mayoveth gazing out a nearby window. Vairly saw the Sphere of Doom and quietly walked over to it. They needed to break it.

Just then, Mayoveth whirled around, staring at her mom. "Oh, I was not expecting a visitor today." He chuckled at his own joke. Clearly, he did not see Vairly. As he talked, Vairly walked over to his desk, grabbed a metal candlestick and crept back to the globe. By now, he had a rope around her mom's hands.

He wondered why her mom hadn't resisted him tying her hands together. He thought to himself, "I think she knows that these ropes won't untie unless the Sphere of Doom is broken." Suddenly, he realized he'd been tricked. Mallory hadn't come alone. He whirled around just in time to see Vairly bring down the candlestick, shattering the globe. The ropes across Vairly's mom's wrists slid to the floor. Mayoveth's prison doors swung open and the tower turned to a palace of gold.

They heard the sound of heavy boots coming down the hall. Mayoveth's army marched into the chamber. Mayoveth declared, "Get them!" but instead, they grabbed him.

"What!" he cried, "I am your master!"

One guard answered rather harshly, “Not anymore.”

They heard his protests as they dragged him away. Vairly’s dad ran in and scooped her and her mom up in a bear hug. As the family traveled home, they were relieved to see the Everflames only as small piles of ashes. The villagers reunited with their lost family members. That night they had a grand feast, which would become a tradition for many years to come.

Gia Woelfel
Litchfield, MN
3rd Place

Someday

A girl named Sheila once lived in a small house in the woods, but now, oh, now she lives in an orphanage with two owners: the Popins. Every day Sheila would ask for a balcony. “Just one time?” Sheila would cry. After two months of begging, the Popins finally bought her dream balcony.

One Monday night Sheila was looking outside stargazing all over the river land. “Someday,” she mumbled to herself. Sheila then fell fast asleep.

“Sheila!” her brother whispered.”

“Yeah?” Sheila mumbled.

“We have to talk,” he cried.

“Um, okay.” She followed her brother to his bed. ”What are we doing?” she asked.

“You know how I’m 17?” he asked quietly.

“Uh, yeah. Why?” she asked.

“It is almost New Year’s Eve,” he cried.

“Yeah, so?” Sheila wondered.

“When kids in the orphanage turn 18, they have to leave,” he cried.

“No, it can’t be!” Sheila cried. Her heart turned numb and she felt sick inside her stomach. “I just want you to be safe!” Sheila sobbed.

After that they sat in bed, facing each other.

“Sheila?” Silin whispered.

“Yeah?” she said.

“I am sorry,” he frowned.

“Well anyway, goodnight,” Sheila said.

“Goodnight!” Silin smiled.

In the morning Silin went downstairs to sweep the floor. Sheila was up earlier than Silin to see the sparkling river glistening with snow. “Someday,” she mumbled. She went downstairs to find her brother dancing with his mop all over the soapy halls.

“Is that Silin mopping his heart out?” Mr. Popins groaned.

“Yes, honey. I just wish we could be children again.” Mrs. Popins frowned.

“Back when we had to clean all day? Back when we slept outside? And back when we were treated poorly? Why would we want to be children again?” Mr. Popins wondered aloud.

They looked face to face, hugging each other. Mr. Popins could feel Mrs. Popins heartbeat as they went down stairs.

“Silin, you aren’t finished!” Mr. Popins howled.

“Uh, sorry. I can work harder!” Silin nervously muttered.

“No, I have a better idea.” Mrs. Popins smirked.

“From now on, you have to wake up at 5:00 a.m. to work,” Mr. Popins insisted.

“Yes, Mr.,” Silin said.

Then, Mr. and Mrs. Popins went upstairs to wake the other children.

“Wake up Cindy and Manny, before we put you in time out!” Mr. Popins shouted.

“Now, now honey, can’t we wake children in peace instead of like an attacking lion?” Mrs. Popins asked as she put her arm on Mr. Popins shoulder, who rolled his eyes.

“Well, I guess we can see how it works out. Wake up,” Mr. Popins said softer than every cloud on the earth.

* * *

Mr. and Mrs. Popins had troubles of their own when they were younger. When Mrs. Popins hit the age of ten and Mr. Popins was eight, Mr. Popins worked with his dad at a shoe shop out west. His dad left him suddenly leaving him on his own. Mr. Popins traveled far and wide, before settling at the house of a woman he met in the mountains. After becoming friends with the old lady's daughter, Mr. Popins decided to stay. He didn't have a mom back then, which is why he went to the woman's house. He couldn't have a chance of surviving anyway, but when he discovered that the house was safe, he was relieved.

One day the lady's husband left her, taking almost all the money and never coming back.

"You will work for me now!" The lady wheeled.

"Why?" Mr. Popins cried.

"Mommy, please let him stay here without working!" the little girl cried as she tugged her mom's shirt.

"No. This kid has been sitting around enough!" she moaned.

Mr. Popins got right on his knees and put his hands together looking at the lady, sobbing, and sobbing. "Please, please, just please!" he begged.

The lady felt rude for what she was doing. In her mind she could see the boy and her daughter marrying at the age of twenty one. She didn't want life to go by so fast. The lady agreed to let the boy stay one more night at the cottage, but if he came back he would work for her for the rest of his life.

The boy looked around the small log home, with its long smooth bed and a hole in the wall with a curtain covering it.

"Hey boy!" Mrs. Popins whispered.

"It's me, the girl!" she cried.

"Oh, yeah. I never got to introduce myself," the boy laughed.

"Oh, me too. My name is Luan!" she whispered inside a

blanket on the bed.

“Oh, I am Millow.” He grinned.

“Sorry about my mom!” she frowned.

“Wait, she’s your Mom?” the boy asked.

“Yeah,” the girl moaned.

“Well, goodnight!” Millow sighed.

“Good night, Millow,” Luan whispered back.

In the morning a stranger was at the door.

“Hello!” the lady said cheerfully.

“Have you seen my grandson?” grumbled the stranger.

“That horrible smelly boy?” the lady questioned. “Yes!” she excitedly grinned as she grabbed the boy and pushed him toward the door.

“Do you know this old man, Millow?” the lady asked.

“Grandpa!” the boy cried giving him a big warm hug. “I thought you died!” he cried.

Then, Luan opened a drawer by the bed and looked at the special key. As Luan placed it in Millow’s pocket, his grandpa pulled him to a small wooden-wheeled wagon pulled by two horses. In the middle of the ride, the boy felt a little thing in his back pocket. It was a small key. On the bottom of the key it said, *Love Luan, keep visiting me in my dreams.*

“Sheila, get up now!” Mrs. Popin yelled.

“Yes ma’am!” she cried and went downstairs to dust the wood.

“Ohh, dancing on one leg, not to really brag, but dancing on one leg is cooler than two!” Silin sang.

“Shut your mouth, Silin, this instant!” Mr. Popins howled.

“Yes Mr.!” Silin cried, getting right back to work.

Mr. and Mrs. Popins went to talk upstairs. “So, you know how when we were younger?” he grinned.

“Yes, but I do not want to talk about it,” Mrs. Popins groaned.

“One word: key.” He smiled.

“The key!” “What about the key?” Mrs. Popins questioned.

“What is it for?” Mr. Popins asked.

“You give it to someone you think needs it. Someday, that someone will know what it is for and will unlock something beautiful. If their heart doesn’t shine, they must give it to someone else!” she explained.

“I think I know that someone! Silin!” yelled Mr. Popins.

Immediately, Silin appeared. “Yes Mr.?” he asked.

“Take this key,” Mr. Popins demanded.

“Is this a joke?” Silin asked, hesitant to take the key.

“Take it!” he shouted.

“What is it for?” Silin asked.

“Take it if your heart shines. If it doesn’t, give it to someone else,” explained Mr. Popins.

“Okay!” Silin smiled, examining the key as he went back to work. He wanted to keep the key, to see something, something amazing.

Days passed and he still wanted to see that something. He knew the key wasn’t for him and that he had to do the right thing.

“Hey Sheila!” he began.

“Yeah, Silin?” she responded.

“I have a key for you,” he said, pulling the key from his pants pocket.

“Where did you get it?” she asked, examining the key in his hand.

“I don’t want to get you curious!” he frowned.

“Well thanks?” Sheila frowned. “Why?” she asked.

“You’re so curious!” he laughed.

“I know. I like thinking,” she giggled and then went to

bed.

At the start of New Years, Sheila was still wondering about the key. That night she got out of bed to see the night sky. "Someday," she mumbled to herself, and then fell fast asleep.

Next morning, Silin got up and started his work. Mr. Popins was reading a book called *Dreamer*.

"Mr. Popins, what about the kids? We have to wake them all up!" Mrs. Popins cried.

"Just make a big bell, ring it, and they shall wake up!" he grumbled, setting his book down.

"When we have one," she offered.

"Just have the kids make one!" he yawned. "I am tired of working so hard. Why did we start this orphanage?" he howled.

"Honey, we are the lazy ones. The children work all day. We are lazy!" she shouted.

"Well, if that's what you think, you should go back to school!" Mr. Popins shouted.

"Wait, honey, I have an idea!" she grinned.

"Spit it out!" he grumbled.

"Well, the kids' education matters to us!" she continued. "Why don't we start a learning class!" she smiled.

"That would cost thousands!" he shouted.

"Well, I will do it!" she argued. "I was the one who started and paid for the orphanage; I can end it!" she angrily shouted.

Mr. Popins' face grew angry. Mrs. Popins wanted to change things and follow her heart! He remembered when Mrs. Popins was a little girl and wanted to be a teacher.

"So, what's the plan?" Mrs. Popins asked.

"For you to go to bed, and wake up making sense while I sit and read a book!" he shouted.

"What about the kids?" she asked.

“We can think of a punishment for their misbehavior,” he laughed.

“But if we don’t wake them up, how is that their fault?” Mrs. Popins shouted back.

“It isn’t. Now go to bed!” Mr. Popins slammed his fist into the chair.

So the kids never woke up, and Mr. Popins decided he worked too hard. He wanted a little bit more rest.

“Honey!” Mrs. Popins shouted.

”Yeah?” he groaned.

“The kids; what about the kids?!” she nervously howled.

“It is still dark. Go to bed!” Mr. Popin shouted with anger.

“It is 7:36 a.m. I expect you to stand up and help me wake up the kids!” she yelled.

“No, you do it!” he grumbled.

“I do it? Okay, then I expect you to make breakfast!” Mrs. Popins demanded.

“No, the kids have to do that,” he whined.

“Well, I guess no breakfast for us either!” she said and went from room to room to wake up the kids.

Sheila dashed down the old brick steps as she glared at Mr. Popins.

“What do you want?” he questioned.

“I want to leave the orphanage with my brother!” she exclaimed.

“You think we would let you go?” he laughed.

“Well, yes,” Sheila mumbled.

“I say no!” he shouted.

“Okay,” she said sadly looking down at the ground. Sheila turned around and ran to her balcony and looked over the glittering snow. “Some day,” she mumbled.

“It is New Years!” Cee Cee laughed. “Oh, I am going to have fun!” she giggled.

“Yeah!!” Mable smiled at Cee Cee.

Cee Cee went to the orphanage at age twelve. Her parents had twins and shouted for her to leave the home. Cee Cee enjoys Sheila’s brother. They used to dance together in the creek waters.

“Well, why do I have to suffer!” Cee Cee mumbled.

“I don’t know,” Mable groaned.

“Well, I am sick of cleaning!” Cee Cee cried, smashing her bucket of water on the ground.

“You’re so going to get in trouble!” Mable cried, putting her hands on her pale face.

“Bye, bye!” Cee Cee shouted.

The Popins kept their doors locked so nobody could escape. They ran straight down the stairs glaring at little Cee Cee.

“Bad lady!” Mrs. Popins shouted.

“To the corner!” Mr. Popins declared, leading Cee Cee downstairs. The corner was a small dog kennel that they put the children in if they misbehaved. “Corner, one hour!” Mr. Popins shouted.

“Why, why, why!” Cee Cee cried, watching Mr. Popins head upstairs.

Dashing down the stairs came Sheila creaking the door open. “I heard Mr. Popins shout,” she whispered.

“Yeah” Cee Cee frowned.

“I can try to unlock the cage with my key!” she said.

“Yes!” Cee Cee cried.

The door didn’t open at first, but after a few tugs it worked. Cee Cee dashed up the stairs. “Silin, Silin, come on Silin!” Cee Cee cried.

“Yeah?” Silin said running out of the upstairs door.

“We’re escaping!” she said.

“Okay!” he said running downstairs, taking the key from Sheila.

“Hey!” she shouted.

“Shhh!” Cee Cee whispered. “We’re escaping!” she said.

“No!” Sheila cried.

“Yes we are, and your coming with us!” Silin said tugging his sister Sheila towards the door.

“I can open it!” Sheila said unlocking the door right as the Popins dashed down the stairs. ”Run!” Sheila shouted.

“Please!” Cee Cee cried running as fast as she could. She tripped on a rock. ”Help me! Silin wait!” Cee Cee cried.

“Sheila, I will miss you!” Silin sobbed as he stopped running.

“Silin, what are you doing?!” Sheila howled, but Silin didn’t respond. When Sheila looked back she saw Mr. Popins and Mrs. Popins, and Silin on the ground. “What happened?!” she shouted.

“All I saw was your brother,” Cee Cee cried.

“Can’t we just help him?!” she cried.

“We don’t have time!” Cee Cee sobbed. After running, Cee Cee looked back to see if the Popins were still running.

“Look! The river creek!” Sheila smiled.

“Oh,” Cee Cee mumbled.

“Are you okay?” Sheila asked.

“Yes, better than ever!” Cee Cee frowned.

“You sure?” Sheila asked.

“Well, I am just a little hungry,” Cee Cee frowned.

Sheila looked around the creek, and all she could see was birds, worms, and Cee Cee.

Cee Cee looked straight at the river creek. “Nothing!” Cee Cee frowned.

“Any plans?” Sheila asked.

“Well, do you have any dreams, or hopes?” Cee Cee asked, walking by the creek.

“Um, well yes,” Sheila frowned.

“What are those dreams?” Cee Cee asked.

“Well, every night I dream of seeing the creek, but now that I am here, I don’t feel how I thought I would feel.” Sheila frowned.

“I have a dream, too,” Cee Cee said.

“What is it?” Sheila asked.

“To go along and sail over oceans and lakes collecting sea shells,” Cee Cee replied.

“Someday,” Sheila mumbled, falling fast asleep. Sheila was dreaming in her head about her *someday*, like *where’s my someday? I want my day! Is someday tomorrow?* she wondered. But Sheila was not even close to her dreams; she didn’t even know where her dreams were.

In the morning, Cee Cee starting pounding on Sheila’s chest. “Get up, get up!” she howled.

“Okay, but now what?” Sheila asked.

“We let the creek bring us to our destiny!” Cee Cee smiled jumping into the creek.

“But we’re going different directions!” Sheila said.

“I know,” Cee Cee mumbled waving her hands goodbye.

Sheila didn’t know what to do. All she did in the river creek was sleep, listening to what Cee Cee had said. The next morning Sheila felt numb, alone, and afraid, and like nothing but a sack on a water stream. “What will I do!” she cried thinking how important the stream was for her. In her head she thought about her destiny. Sheila looked down by the creek. There was a rock. Should I hop out of the creek? Should I stay put? She thought about how she knew she wanted this. She did still want to swim around the creek, and laugh, run, and play, but she still sat there waiting for the end.

“Where are you, Silin?” she cried as she looked down in her pocket and felt nothing but cold water, nothing but river

creek water. “The key!” Sheila cried looking around and saw nothing but fields of green. Everything was just green. There were no animals, no birds, and no people. “Stay calm!” Sheila mumbled. “You can do this!” she cried floating on the river stream.

When Sheila had wished for freedom and fun, she had wanted to laugh, not cry, and all she was doing on this river stream was frowning, crying, and hoping. “I can do this by myself!” she sobbed pulling herself up into the grasslands. Sheila looked around the place to see if there was food, water, and shelter. After looking around, she spotted a small bird trying to fly, and two bigger birds flying away. Sheila remembered how she was abandoned, and left alone by her parents. She felt her heart pounding in a way she or the world would never be able to explain.

“Why!” she sobbed looking around to see a nest, home to a family for a baby bird. When she looked up, she saw the two parent birds fluttering away, with no care, no worry, and no frown, just two birds flying all over the bright baby blue sky. The baby bird was worried and frightened of Sheila, but her tender hands carefully picked the bird up, and held the bird up to the sky. “Fly, fly, fly!” she said hoping the baby bird would flutter its wings, but the baby just sat there sitting curled up like a kitten in Sheila’s hands. She had never seen such grace from an animal.

She looked at the bird remembering the times she wanted her dreams, and hopes, and freedom to come true. “I wish I could help,” she mumbled, crying, watching the bird trying to fly from her hands into the blue sky. But it was too fragile; its wings just limped around her hands. The bird was scared of Sheila’s face. Its eyes only recognized the palms of Sheila’s hands. She had a dream, a dream of freedom, a dream of joy, yet Sheila still felt stuck in a room with no escape. “Still alive,” Sheila said looking back at the baby

bird. "Someday," she mumbled.

The next morning Sheila felt sore in her leg. *Was it the fear of being alone?* she wondered. The baby bird was in a small blue or green colored swamp. Sheila was looking at the water. She had seen the bird moving its wings, trying to swim, paddling back and fourth, again and again.

"What is happening!" Sheila cried, dashing toward the swamp, "I can help!" she cried, jumping into the green or blue colored swamp. Sheila stumbled through the weeds trying to get a grip on the baby bird. Sheila kept pulling and pulling through the swamp, but she was getting pulled down by the weeds into the deep sea. She kept sinking lower and lower until she couldn't breathe. Her face started turning pale, as she pulled and tugged at the sturdy weeds. Her hands were cold. Her face was turning bright white, and her toes kept aching. Before long she stopped trying, and waited for the end of her.

She heard a small sound in the water. She kept her eyes shut, frightened of the noise above. She felt a few little tugs on the weeds. After tugging, Sheila swam up and saw a small speck of blue coming closer. As it got closer she spotted the feather. She saw the small bird with two taller birds above. She recognized that the two birds were the parents from before, and when she saw the family with weeds stuck on their beaks, she started to cry, sobbing cries of joy. She felt important and loved at the moment. "Thank you!" Sheila mumbled watching the family of birds flutter away. Sheila walked into a pile of dry dirt. Looking down, she remembered playing in the dirt and splashing puddles on the Popins when she was younger. She remembered the cause of abandonment.

"Someday," she mumbled. "I am a misfit." Sheila frowned, looking at the sky. She stood up proud, spreading her hands apart, feeling the air come through her fingers, "I

have the clouds!” Sheila cried closing her eyes. She stayed in place feeling the air on her toes and her light brown locks of hair blowing in the wind. “I will always be me, and I will always be with my heart!” Sheila shouted walking toward the water, feeling the sand beneath her toes. “I love nature,” she said as she walked toward the river creek to arrive at her destiny, not caring if Cee Cee was lying about the whole thing. Then Sheila fell fast asleep in the river creek. She was awakened by the small stars glistening in the black. “Tomorrow,” she mumbled quietly falling back to sleep.

The next morning Sheila was woken up by a man in a field. Curious, Sheila ran to the man in the field. “Oh hello!” Sheila cried.

“Oh, my back. I am too old to run this farm!” the man frowned.

“Can I help?” Sheila asked. “Oh, it would be hard, but if you wanted to, then sure!” the man laughed.

Sheila knew that this was the end of the river. “I would love to help, but I am a little hungry.” Sheila smiled.

“Well, you can start by getting the cattle into my barn. They can’t freeze with December coming up!” the man grinned moving his hands slowly to Sheila. The old man was scared and unsure of Sheila’s appearance, but he was willing to take the chance.

Sheila bent her legs to hug the old man, as it felt warm, and cold at the same time. “Who are you?” she asked.

“Well, I am Jim Wilom, and oh, I miss my grandson Wilson. He left with that girl to run an orphanage,” he frowned.

Sheila gave the man a hug. “I know where he is,” she grinned. The someday was today.

POETRY
Grades 5 & 6

Laura Peterson
Slayton, MN
1st Place

Howl

Its large majestic paws pounding gracefully
Through the glistening, powdery snow,
The breath billowing and transforming into miniature clouds.
The wind carries the stars with it,
Winding them in a blaze of swirls,
And now coming to a stop along with the wolf
On the edge of the cliff with no horizon—
The starry wolf lifts its head,
Howling to the sky.
The mountains sparkle in satisfying beauty
As dawn breaks,
And the wolf disappears into the
Shadowy trees.

Laura Peterson
Slayton, MN
2nd Place

The Last Field

This is a field,
Vast and far
Clear from buildings
And poisoning tar
This is the last field on Earth

Miles away horns honk,
Tools clank,
The air is cold and dank
This is the last field on Earth

My fingertips brush the tops of tan plants,
My silhouette shows against the moon,
My soul calm, happy, and unstressed,
Someday though, this will all change
This is the last field on Earth

This world, once so pure and green,
But wait one day,
One day you'll see—
This world can be amazing
This is the last field on Earth

Dawn and dusk light
Filtering not through tower windows,
But through grass, through trees
In which the air billows
This is the last field on Earth

Creatures not evil nor vile,
Now gone only to be forgotten,
What did they ever do?
No, it's a matter of what we did to them
This is the last field on Earth

But, one day this very field will be one of
Millions around the world,
Everyone around the Earth can help too,
But right now, it all starts with you!

Samantha Winter
Slayton, MN
3rd Place

Dawn

Dawn listens all night,
And forever will.
Dawn finds your inner peace with her colors.
But in the morning she retires to her home.

Dawn mutters her thoughts to you,
She brings you her opinion to follow
Then you wake up and she's gone away
She wants to stay and rock you asleep but she can't.

When she's gone you long for her,
She comforts you, she guides you.
Dawn tells you you're safe
And remembers everything you tell her.

She takes you into your dreams,
And delivers you safely
Dawn reminds you that you matter.
She comforts you, you love her and she loves you.

FICTION
Grades 5 & 6

Lila Scandrett
Slayton, MN
1st Place

All Because of Ella

I have a secret. A secret I have not told anyone. If anyone knew about it, no one would like me. I'm dying to tell someone. The secret is deep down, buried inside of me. The secret is that I'm in fifth grade, and I cannot read.

It's not that I just don't do it, but that I've never learned how! I'm like other kids my age in every other way. I run and jump, climb trees and ride bike. I can do almost everything anyone else can do. Except read. And since I can't read, I can't spell. Since I can't spell, I can't write. I get bad grades in every class that involves words.

I know I should tell someone. I really do. I've just never had the courage to do so. It's like if I say something, everyone will laugh. Everyone still laughs when they see my writing or spelling assignments, and I haven't told anyone.

In kindergarten, the class learned to read. Well, everyone but me. The teacher explained that "a" said "ahh" and "b" said "buh," and sometimes there's a silent "e" at the end of a word that makes the vowel say its name. I didn't quite understand that I should ask for help if I needed to. Her explanations didn't process in my brain, and I didn't ask for help.

In school, I've always fake read. I opened up a book and just stared at the still letters on the page, not moving and not telling a story. I've kept my secret to myself. Until I met Ella.

Ella is very small, and sits in a pink wheelchair. Most people think she's weird and ignore her. When I look at her, though, I see, yes, a tiny body and skinny legs. But I also see

a girl with a big heart and brave eyes like she can face anything. She was new to the school about two months ago. She and I became good friends the day she came. Most people would think she's not that smart. They're wrong. Ella is very smart, probably the smartest in our class.

Today is my least favorite day. It's Monday. Library day. Library day means a quick trip to the school library, then reading for the rest of the hour.

"Class. I have an announcement to make. Today you are going to receive a book I assign to you. You will read the book, and next Friday you'll share a book report about it."

"Can I have a baseball book?" shouted one of my classmates, Tommy, I think.

"Yeah! I want a Star Wars one!" Jose yelled. I just sat there thinking about what the teacher just said. A book report! How was I supposed to write a book report if I couldn't even read! I raised my hand.

"Um, is this required, or optional?" I asked with a worried tone in my voice.

"Since when is anything optional in my class, Mallory? Is there a problem with doing the assignment?" Ms. Zepper answered strictly.

"No ma'am, I'm sorry," I mumbled. I glanced over to Ella. She still didn't know my secret. She loved to read. I wish she could help me read. She'd be the perfect person. I just know it. After school, I ran up to her. "Hey, Ella!" I called.

"Oh, hi!" she replied and smiled. "Would you like to walk home with me? Well, you walk and I'll roll."

"Sure!" I exclaimed. Maybe this would be the perfect time to tell her the secret.

"So, is everything all right? I mean, about the book report and all?" she asked me. I felt embarrassed.

"Yeah, I guess so," I said. "I just don't like reading."

“Is there a reason why?” she asked.

I squirmed around. How was I supposed to explain to the smartest kid in the fifth grade that I couldn’t read? “Well, um....” I started.

“Come on, you can tell me,” she told me politely.

“I know, I’m just embarrassed,” I whispered.

“I promise I won’t hold any judgment against you. And I won’t laugh,” she giggled.

“Okay. Here it goes. I, well, um, don’t um, know how to read,” I said awkwardly. Silence. “I’m sorry, I just don’t know how.”

“Do you have dyslexia?” Ella asked me.

“No. At least, I don’t think so,” I answered. “It’s just, I never understood how to.”

“I have an idea!” she exclaimed. “How about you come to my house. I’ll teach you and read your book with you. What book did Ms. Zepper assign you?” I handed her my book. “*A Wrinkle In Time*. That’s a hard read. Wow,” she sighed.

I called my mom and told her I was going to a friend’s house. Then, we went to Ella’s house. Her house was a brick house with floor to ceiling windows. On the porch, there was a white couch with pink flowers and a coffee table. A rocking chair was in the other corner, and there was a ramp so Ella could easily get up.

We went into her house. She grabbed some cheese and pretzels and we went to her room. Ella took some paper and markers from her shelf and started writing one letter of the alphabet on each note card. After she capped the marker, she placed the cards in front of me.

“Okay. Here is each letter of the alphabet. I’m going to teach you what each letter says. Let’s start with ‘a.’ Do you know what it sounds like?” she asked.

“Doesn’t it say ‘ahh’?” I questioned.

“Yes! Great job! Let’s keep going.”

By the end of the alphabet I knew every letter sound A-Z. Ella began teaching me how to put letter sounds together to make words. At the end of the afternoon, I was able to read some beginner words including at, the, to, and, or, and go.

“Thank you so much, Ella!” I exclaimed.

“No problem! Come back tomorrow and we can continue with harder words. You did a great job, and I have no doubt you’ll ace that book report!” she told me cheerfully.

As I walked home that evening, I couldn’t help but think about how great of a friend Ella is. She didn’t tell me I was dumb or stupid, she didn’t say I should of told someone earlier, and she took time out of her work to help me. I kept thinking about that as I fell asleep, and when I woke up in the morning.

The next morning I slid into my homeroom seat next to Ella. “Are you coming over today?” she asked me.

“Yep! And I’ve been practicing!” I exclaimed.

“Great! You’re definitely improving!”

Class was long today, because the teachers just kept yapping. And when I say yapping I mean literally just talking and talking. Mr. Proker about the writing contest, Ms. Zepper about the book report, Mrs. Lucas about the math test coming up! Ugh! So. Many. Words!

“So, how many more words did you practice last night?” Ella asked on the way over to her house after school.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe ten more,” I answered. “I taught myself ‘under’.”

“Nice work!” she congratulated me. At her house, again, she grabbed markers and notecards and started writing words on them. She taught me about th, sh, wh, oo, ou, ow, ck.

By the end of the day, I knew words like: this, ship, white, cook, hour, cow, and clock. I continued to go over to

Ella's house everyday after school. At the end of the second week, I had an outstanding book report that blew the teachers away. By the end of the year, I knew lots and lots of words.

Ella is the kind of person who cares more about true friendship than about her own time. She is great. Kind and caring. Loving and selfless. A friend and companion. She helped me know that friendship can climb the highest mountains. Now I know so many words! Happy words. Sad words. Jumpy words. Long words. Short words. Hundreds of words. All because of Ella.

Iris Donner
Raymond, MN
2nd Place

Home Sweet Home

Sweat dripped down my forehead and into my eyes. Everything was blurry. I squinted, and wiped my face with my t-shirt. Just as I expected, the pitcher stepped back, looked straight at the catcher, and wound up. Then came his curveball.

“STRIKE THREE! YER OUT!” the catcher yelled.

“UUUGGGHHH! Not again!” I shouted with clenched teeth while holding back frustrated tears. It was the third time that week that I struck out and let my team down.

“Come on JJ, you can do better than that, right?” my best friend, Charlie “Playa” Richard, said.

“Yeah, we just saw you win a game on Saturday,” added Bo “Junior” Smith.

“Dinner!” yelled one of our moms. We didn’t know which mom, but it didn’t matter; everyone was hungry.

All the guys ran inside, greedy for food, but I didn’t go. I sat on the bench in the dugout nearby pouting, wondering how on EARTH I messed that up... again. *Was my swing off? Was my head in the game? Did I close my eyes? Maybe I didn’t get all the sweat out of my eyes.*

Then it hit me. *Was it because...*

I couldn’t bear it. Unknowingly holding my breath I let it creep in.

...I’m a girl?

“Jennifer! Come in for dinner right now, young lady!” my mom yelled.

Ah, the nicknames. “Young lady” actually means “You’d better listen.”

“Coming, Mom!” I replied.

I kicked rocks as I trudged across the street, away from the dusty field. I'm eleven years old. It is a hot 1990 summer and I am four weeks from turning twelve, on the first day of school. My dream is to play in the big leagues, but like I said, I'm a girl.

I trudged up the patio steps, opened the door, and as I walked into the house, my mom acted as if a filthy, wet dog had just walked into her home and was planning on staying for dinner. She started gasping and coughing as I walked in. I rolled my eyes and plopped down in my seat at the table. As I started eating my dinner, my dad made sure I knew that he was hungry and told me that he waited only because he loved me. But I know better, we have both experienced the power of mom and her patented glare. Then he asked how my day was and I replied, "Fine."

My mom finally stood up and said, "Goodness Jennifer, you NEED a shower. Go now."

"But mom—" I argued.

"No, I'm the mother and the victim here. You are unbearable. No dinner until I approve your level of cleanliness!"

"Fine! If I'm so 'unbearable' I'll go shower!" I yelled as I stomped up the hall to my bedroom.

Oof. That came off harshly, I hope she won't be mad at me. I blame my budding hormones.

My mom and I weren't tight because my mom didn't like that I hang out with boys and come in the house the way I just did all the time. She wanted me to be more ladylike. My dad on the other hand was the only thing keeping me from running away and living my baseball dream.

I looked in the mirror on my bedroom door. *Wow, she was right, even I think I'm disgusting.* I groaned and freely rolled my eyes. *I hate it when she's right.*

I examined myself intensely. I had dust on my face, stains on my pants, and my ponytail was barely keeping

shape. I was a mess and crabby...no, I was peevish. When I hopped in the shower, I kept thinking about how my form was back at the field. I couldn't put my finger on it. Again and again '*It's cause I'm a girl,*' poisoned my mind.

After the much needed shower I avoided my mom and went straight to bed. I thought no longer about the game, just about how my mother was so frustrated with me. I don't know how I'm going to get out of this one.

When I woke up the next morning, I tried to avoid her, but it's her house. And 'she's the mom' as she periodically reminds me. If I've learned anything in this life, it's that moms know ALL and SEE ALL. And there's no way around it. I snatched up an apple from the kitchen. I heard her footsteps close behind me and I froze, as if I had robbed a bank and got busted. She ignored my staring eyes and clicked over to the kitchen sink. Thinking that I got off the hook, I relaxed and kept heading for the door.

"Jennifer, wait," my mom said. I winced, sighed, and turned around.

"I need to talk to you about how we treated each other last night. I didn't like it and I'm sorry I got so mad. I was just very consumed over Heather's pageant dress. You wouldn't believe it..."

I stopped listening. My sister, Heather, has entered every pageant and beauty contest that California ever had to offer. And she's won almost every single time. The one time she didn't get the W was when one of my sister's high heels snapped just as she was walking out onto the stage and she tripped! I won't name names, but it was probably Melody Williams who did it. Oops, guess I will. She's my sister's arch nemesis. Girl athletes are competitive. Pageant girls are cutthroat. Don't let their pretty little faces fool you, there's a devil brewing inside. Anyway, as I started walking away, Mom caught me.

“Jennifer Lynn. I’m trying to have a serious conversation with you. Will you please get back here right now?”

“Sorry, Mom,” I said with my head hung.

“Now, I believe you have something to say to me,” my mom said expectantly.

“What? I already said sorry,” I said sharply.

“No, from last night.”

“Sorry?”

“Jennifer,” she said firmly.

“What, do you want a hug to go with it?” I snapped. I caught myself and threw my hand over my mouth, “I didn’t mean it like that,” I said regretfully.

“No, I know. I guess I was kind of pushing it. You should apologize when you’re ready.”

I kept walking as I turned to leave for the third time that morning, and reached for the handle on the door, when she stopped me one more time.

“Were you serious about that hug?” she asked meekly.

“Yeah,” I replied. A hug felt good, a refuge from all things stressful.

I was headed to Charlie’s house. Not to play baseball. We didn’t have enough players for that, they all had to go... *shudder* clothes shopping. I love baseball. Why do I love baseball so much? Why do I spend every day playing it? “Why not softball?” you ask. I reply with, “Why not baseball?” When I saw a baseball game for the first time with my dad on TV, I fell in love with it. I stared at the screen, then I turned up to my dad and asked him where all the girl players were. He chuckled and said to me, “Sorry honey, no girls in baseball.”

I don’t play softball because, well I guess I just like baseball better. I don’t really know why. I don’t think I ever will. All I want to do is play baseball and if a girl wants to play baseball there’s not much opportunity to do that.

Charlie and I were busy playing catch and practicing our fielding and we lost track of time. Before we knew it, his mom came outside and told me my mom called and she wanted me for dinner. I said my goodbyes and walked home. At the table, my mom started a conversation.

“You know, honey,” she said, turning to my dad, “It’s about time we go back to school shopping. School starts next week. We ought to get these girls a cute back-to-school outfit before then.”

I groaned.

“Well, do you want to go into seventh grade looking like a slob?” she questioned.

I shrugged. I was so not ready for school to start.

“Well, we can go this Saturday,” Mom finished.

“Okay, fine,” I sighed.

“Oh, stop being such a baby! I like clothes shopping,” said my sister. “It’ll be fun. Oh! And mom, guess what. I need a dress for the blah blah blah—it all sounds like this to me anyway—blah blah blah blah blah. Lavender! blah blah blah dress training blah blah blah I’m gonna dominate this blah blah...”

On the first day of school, I wore a plaid skirt, tights and a white blouse that my mom picked out. It was, in a word, “ew.” I was hardly staying awake when the bell rang and we headed for the lunchroom. On the way, a poster on the school bulletin board caught my eye. It was yellow and bright. It said:

Go Hornets!

Join the Fall Baseball team of West Central Middle School!

Tryouts on Tuesday, August 14...

I stopped reading. I was trying out for baseball!

The next day my mom made me put on a dress and go to my sister's third pageant that year. As always, she won. Her new title is, "Miss Teen California."

"Mom?" I asked on the way home.

"Yes, honey," she replied.

"There's a baseball league that's being put together by the school this year, and I was wondering—"

"No, Jennifer, I cannot have my baby playing with a bunch of smelly, stinky, inappropriate boys. How am I going to turn you into a lady?"

Dad looked at my mom and quietly muttered, "I was one of those *smelly stinky, inappropriate boys* when you started dating me."

"Well," my mom started, "that was...umm...different and..."

"Oh, c'mon. Why not?" I shouted.

"Because, I don't want you getting hurt, and it is unacceptable the way you come to dinner. No. My answer is 'no', and that's that."

Once we got home, I went straight to bed and my mom and dad started whispering and mumbling about me. I was going to go out for baseball no matter what.

The next morning, I packed my clothes and left for school without my mom suspecting a thing. After school, I snuck into the locker room and quickly changed into some sweats. I ran out to the field and the coach didn't even flinch, probably 'cause I did a good job tucking my hair into my hat, and I kept my head down, just like most of the other boys.

"Okay boys..." Yes, he doesn't know yet!

"We're going to introduce ourselves," he turned to me, "You're up son."

"Um, I'm... I'm..." I turned my head up, "I'm Jennifer Young."

The coach's eyes got as big as frisbees! He coughed and said clearly but nervously, "No girls allowed."

"What? That's not fair; it didn't say that on the poster!" I argued.

"Well, um, no girls allowed. It's the rule."

"Seriously? You're kidding, right?" I said. "That's a dumb rule."

"Well, a rule is a rule," stated the coach.

"By who?" I asked.

"Uh, I don't actually know. Maybe the board," replied the coach.

"Well, give me a shot. You didn't even know I was a girl until you heard my name." I gave a pretty good argument. What was he going to say now? He started to reply, when one of the boys spoke up. It was Charlie!

"C'mon coach, she plays with us all the time. She's good," the rest of the boys started to speak up.

"Yeah, coach why not?"

"C'mon, what do you have against her?"

"Yeah, what do you have against her?" I looked really surprised and so did the coach. He looked back at me, and I smiled.

"Fine," he sighed, "you have one practice to prove yourself."

"Everyone, let's give her a shot, okay?"

VICTORY! I was so excited I was jumping and dancing around and singing my favorite song, "U Can't Touch This" by MC Hammer.

The coach rolled his eyes.

I was starting my baseball career! When I got home from practice, I tried to sneak upstairs to go shower and hide my clothes, but when I opened the door, Mom asked, "How was practice?"

What?! Shoot! She's not supposed to know!

“What do you mean?” I stammered as my eyes shuffled across the floor. She turned to look at me and said, “I saw the poster when I dropped you off for school that first day. You didn’t think I knew that the second you saw it you were going out for baseball?”

I giggled awkwardly, “Well, um, yeah?”

“Nice try. Why didn’t you just come talk to me about it?”

“I’ve been trying my whole life and I finally got on the team and now I—”

She cut me off. “Wait, you made the team?!” she exclaimed.

“Uh-huh,” I replied nervously.

“I’m so excited!! I can’t believe it! How’d you do it? Girls aren’t even allowed!”

“Hold the phone! I thought you were against me playing baseball?”

“Well, your dad and I have discussed this deeply, and we decided to support you in your passions, including this.”

“So, I can play baseball?” I asked.

“Yes, you may play baseball.”

“Thanks mom!” We embraced each other with the biggest, tightest, most comforting hug ever.

“So,” she said, “let’s spunk up your uniform.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “I already have a uniform and boy, it’s cool.”

“Well, you’re my girl, and I want you to stand out. Maybe some purple spikes on your shoulders and sequins on your number. It’ll be soo pretty!”

“Let’s not go overboard... but a little glitz is alright,” So we spent the next three hours sewing, gluing, cutting, designing, and ordering pizza for dinner. I couldn’t wait for next week’s game against the Tigers. This was going to be epic. Throughout the next week my team and I worked hard,

we wanted to win this just as bad as the Tigers, our nemesis. I felt good about this; the first girl on the team. EVER!

Finally, Saturday arrived. I went straight to the field after putting on my uniform and eating a hearty breakfast of ham, eggs, and hot cereal with raisins. I had to be early for the game.

“I’ll see you there!” my mom yelled from the kitchen. She arrived just as the game was starting. At the bottom of the ninth we were down by two, the bases were loaded, and I was up to bat. I squelched that toxic voice telling me I’m not good enough. Now my mantra was, “I am a girl. I am strong, brave and motivated.” I’m not looking back at the fails and wins that lead me to this moment. I’m soaking it in. It’s time to roar. The wind blew in my face. It was time to redeem myself. The pitcher stared me down. I didn’t flinch. My eyes met his. He threw. I swung and looked up to see my ball flying over everyone. That beautiful, white ball in the baby blue sky.

“RUN!” my team yelled. I bolted as soon as my legs woke up.

“SHE DID IT!!! SHE DID IT!!!” my mom screamed louder than everyone else. I ran and ran and ran until it felt like fire burning in my legs and soul. The crowd was cheering, yelling, and celebrating. I ran into my team as they began lifting me off the ground. I heard the voices that were celebrating and cheering happily. I began to tear up as I thought about everything I had done to get here, and everyone that helped me through it all. I will never forget this moment; I will use it to motivate me. Who knows, maybe, with a lot of hard work and a little luck, I’ll be the first girl to make it in the big leagues. But for now, I just have to keep dreaming.

Brennen Thooft
Lynd, MN
3rd Place

Adventures of Magiland

“Happy Birthday, dude!” shouted Ben and Karsten as I walked past their lockers on my way outside.

“Meet me outside,” I said.

They were going to come over to my house for my birthday party. We were so excited! We were going to play Pokémon, video games, baseball, and basketball.

When we arrived home there was a tan Volkswagen Beetle with a broom sticking out of the window parked in our driveway. By the door we saw an old lady carrying three presents, repeatedly pressing our doorbell.

“I wonder who that is?” wondered Mom.

“It’s a witch!” I replied.

“A witch?” questioned Karsten.

“There’s a broom!” I said. “A witch’s broom.”

“She’s still not a witch,” said Ben.

“Yeah,” said Karsten. “Witches don’t exist.”

“She could still be a witch though,” I said.

When we opened our garage door, the old lady jumped at the chance. She sprinted (very slowly) into our garage. We got out to see what she needed.

“Hello,” she said in a creaky old lady voice. “My name is Ingrid. I have brought these three boys a special gift. Here, take them and open them, please.”

We took the presents and looked inside. We saw a video game called Magiland. I had never heard of it. All three of us picked it up to see what it was about, but when we picked it up, there was suddenly a bright flash of light. The next thing we knew we were in the middle of a desert!

“Why are we in a desert?” questioned Ben.

“How did we get here?” inquired Karsten.

“I can answer both of those questions,” I replied.

“You can?” both Ben and Karsten said together.

“Yeah, that witch named Ingrid used her magical powers to teleport us here,” I replied.

“She wasn’t a witch!” they both yelled in sync. Just then we looked up and saw a witch flying by on a broom, laughing an evil laugh.

“That’s her,” I said proudly.

“That was definitely a witch, even though that’s impossible, but that wasn’t her,” stated Karsten.

“For the millionth time, she is NOT a witch!” Ben shouted.

“She was just an old lady who wanted to give us presents,” added Karsten.

“Whatever,” I said, “Let’s get out of here.”

“And how do we do that?” questioned Ben.

“Don’t ask me,” Karsten answered. “But let’s try anyway.”

So, we wandered around for about five minutes. We found nothing. Five more minutes went by. Still nothing. Then, finally, I discovered a sign covered in sand. I dusted it off. “Magiland,” I read aloud.

“Wait a second,” Ben recalled, “wasn’t that the name of the video game Ingrid gave us? We’re inside of a video game! Cool!”

“Don’t get too excited. It’s dangerous here.”

“Who said that?” I asked.

“Hi,” said a duck. “My name is Johnny the Duck!”

“I didn’t know that ducks could talk,” said Ben. “Hey, do you know how to get out of here, like, get back to earth?”

“If you want to get out of here you’re gonna need these!” said Johnny. He held out three staves and said, “These are the

Staffs of Magiland! Each of them gives a special power to whoever holds it! The Staff of Wisdom will give you telekinesis. The Staff of Nothingness will give you the power to change colors or turn invisible. Last, but not least, is the Staff of Nature! You will be able to breath fire, shoot water, whip vines, make the ground shake, and shoot lasers!”

“I want the Staff of Nature!” I shouted.

“I want the Staff of Wisdom!” yelled Karsten.

“I guess I get the Staff of Nothingness,” said Ben, “but I wanted this one any way. “Where is it?”

“It’s invisible,” said Johnny.

“Oh,” Ben realized, “I get it, but how do we get out of here?”

“You have to go try to beat Ingrid the Witch’s bosses,” Johnny told us.

“Ingrid is a witch!?!?” Karsten and Ben shouted in confusion.

“I told you she was a witch!” I said.

“Anyway,” Johnny continued, “once you beat all her bosses, you have to beat Ingrid and her sidekick Teletan. Once you beat them, you can go through the portal you find there.”

“Boom,” I said. “Simple. Let’s go.”

“O.K.,” Johnny said to us, “but there is one more thing you should know. No one has ever done it.”

“Well we’re going to be the first to do it then,” I said confidently. “So, who is the first Boss?”

“Saguaro the Cactus,” said Johnny.

“We have to fight a cactus?!?!?” I yelled.

“He should be somewhere around here,” Johnny told us.

“Sssomebody’sss here, Sssaguaro.”

“That’s Sammy the Snake, Saguaro’s ally,” Johnny informed us. “All of the bosses have an ally.” Sammy lunged at us with his fangs bared. All of a sudden, he stopped. It

appeared like he was choking. Then, I figured it out. Karsten used his telekinesis to choke Sammy. I burned him with some fire to finish him off. Then, a cactus walked up. It was Saguaro. So I breathed some fire on him. He was a plant, so the fire was strong against him. Once I burned his exterior layer, water came flowing out of him. I should've known cacti store water! He tried to reassemble himself, but Invisible Ben kept him from reassembling.

That's when I realized what I had to do. I shot lasers of electricity out of my eyes. Bye, bye, water! After that, we left the desert and walked into a forest.

"Who's the boss here?" I asked Johnny.

"J.J. Griz," he replied. "All of the trees are his allies. All of them."

"ATTACK!!!!!!"

All of a sudden the trees started chucking apples at us. Karsten steered them away with his mind. Ben turned invisible, caught the apples, and threw them back at the trees. So, I decided to burn them, of course, which started a forest fire. Before I could put out the fire, I heard someone say in a deep voice, "J.J Griz in the house!" Then we saw him. He was a giant grizzly bear with gold chains around his neck.

"You destroy my trees, I destroy you!" he threatened.

Ben and Karsten got right to work on him, but I put the fires out first. Then, well, I burned him. The fire did nothing to him! Next, I tried the lasers. That didn't work either! Finally, I tried something I hadn't done yet. "Earthquake!" I yelled. Ben turned invisible. Karsten started to float. J.J. went flying.

"NOOOOOOOO!!!!!"

Suddenly, there was a chill in the air. That's when I realized we were heading into a cold, mountainous region.

"The boss here is Yamma the Yeti," Johnny informed us. "His ally is Pauline the Penguin. They should be toward the top."

After an hour, we finally got close to the top. Swoosh! Pauline was rapidly sliding down the mountain right at us! I breathed fire at her. She dodged it. Karsten steered her away from us just in time, or else she would have hit us. She charged at us again. Karsten held her back and Invisible Ben held her still. Then, I burned her (surprise, surprise!).

Thud, thud, thud. “Me want eat human!” Yamma started chucking giant ice balls at us.

We dodged them. I decided to try something new. Extremely long vines started flowing out of my ears. I wrapped his legs with the vines and spun him around in the air a couple times. Then, I released my vines and he went soaring into the sky.

“Who’s that?” I asked, as I point to a baby dragon. “Do we have to fight him, too?”

“That’s Draglum. He’s supposed to be the ally of the next boss, Dragonium, but he’s too young to fight,” Johnny informed us. “He is also her baby. I don’t know why he’s up here, though.”

I walked over to him. At first he was shy, but after a while he started to lick my face. I think he likes me! It’s always good to have an enemy on your side. As we walked along I tried to teach him the basics of fighting. He quickly learned how to breath fire. I was so busy teaching Draglum, that I didn’t even notice the setting had changed to a place with volcanoes everywhere.

Then, we saw Dragonium. She looked extremely powerful. She would be tough to beat, even with Draglum on our side. Then, I realized something. Draglum, most likely, wouldn’t fight his mother, no matter how hard we tried. My theory was proven correct the second he saw her. He flew right to her. She was infuriated. She breathed fire around all of us. We were trapped in a ring of fire with a dragon! I quickly put out the fire and shot lasers at her. They hurt her,

but she pushed through it. She tried to burn us but I put out her fire. I shot more lasers at her. She fell to the ground.

Draglum flew over to her. It looked like he was trying to tell her something. Then she stood up and gestured to her back with her head. Hesitantly, we all climbed on her back and she took flight. We had no idea where she was taking us.

Soon, we arrived at the castle. As we climbed down, she nodded her head to wish us good luck and flew away. As we entered the castle, we saw Ingrid and Teletan guarding a portal.

“You’ve made it this far,” threatened Ingrid, “but you won’t be going any further. Mwahahahaha!”

We sprinted toward the portal, but Teletan’s power held us back. Ingrid shot a laser at us with her broom. It’s too strong for Karsten to stop. It knocks us all over. Then, she turns us into mice. As we shrunk, our staffs crashed to the ground. Teletan’s power kept us from running up and grabbing them. Suddenly, I had an idea. I turned around and grabbed it with my tail.

As I grabbed my staff, I started to turn back into a human. My friends do the same. She shot lasers at us again. She was too strong for us. Suddenly, Dragonium, Draglum, Yamma, J.J. Griz, and Saguaro walk in. Draglum must have told his mom how we helped him find her and she must’ve told the other bosses to come help us. All of them attacked at the same time and knocked out both Ingrid and Teletan.

Before we went into the portal, the bosses congratulated us. Then, Johnny took the Staffs of Magiland back and handed us pens that were replicas of them as souvenirs. Finally, we went through the portal.

Once we were back on earth, I checked my watch. While we were in Magiland, time had stopped! Mom didn’t even know we were gone! Besides our adventures in Magiland, we had the best birthday party ever!

NONFICTION
Grades 5 & 6

Kennedy Burch
Slayton, MN
1st Place

Prescott Joseph Burch

April 10th, 2018 was a day I could NEVER forget. That day, my world was flipped upside down. For better or for worse, our family was changing, and we were in it together.

At approximately 7:51 a.m., Prescott Joseph Burch was born. My Dad is a **HUGE** Dallas Cowboys fan. Dak Prescott is the quarterback, and that is where his first name came from. His middle name, Joseph, is my Grandpa Andy's middle name, hence Prescott's became Joseph as well. Of course, Burch is our last name so that was automatically a part of his name, too.

When Prescott was born he was a little bit above average. He was 7 pounds and 15 ounces. Now, he is a really solid baby. He is a little chunky monkey and really heavy.

Rewind to April 10th

My Grandma Sue had come over for the week of my baby brother's birth. She woke me up the day of. I was so ready for school to be over, even though I hadn't even made it there yet.

When lunch time came, I was starving and itching to see my brother. I had an Apple Watch and my dad had texted me that morning (7:51 to be exact) when he was born, on my watch. I ate up my cafeteria food, which actually wasn't that bad. As soon as recess was over, one of my teachers told me to grab my stuff and head to the office.

When I arrived at the office my dad and brother were there grinning at me.

“What are you doing here dad?”

My dad replied, “I know we said we wouldn’t take you out of school early, but your mom and I couldn’t wait.”

I squealed with glee.

“Do you want to see a picture?”

“No I want it to be a surprise,” I said to him. “Oh never mind, I just can’t wait to get there.”

He showed me the picture of my newly born brother, and at that moment I knew my life would never be the same. We drove to the hospital, and on the way there we all talked about the new baby boy.

When we arrived, my dad checked in, and we headed to 5671, my mom’s room. When we walked in, my mom was holding Prescott and we were all smiling. When we stepped over to her bed, she was crying.

“Why are you crying mom,” I asked.

“Well, I’m just so happy that you guys are here. All my kids are here with me. I couldn’t ask for a more special moment.”

We all were tearing up, except for my dad and my baby brother.

“Clean your hands and then maybe your mom will let you hold him,” my Grandma said.

Evan and I walked over and ran our soapy hands under the faucet. Evan said that he wanted to hold him first, so Mom passed the baby over to my dad. He then placed the baby softly and carefully into Evan’s arms.

“Make sure you use that arm to prop his head up,” my Dad said, pointing to my brother’s right arm.

My brother smiled at Prescott. His eyes were shut, but he was slightly grinning.

Then it was my turn to hold him. I sat down on the bench and prepped my arms in the position, the way my dad had shown Evan. When Prescott was in my arms, a warmth filled my body. I can't really explain it. A feeling of pride. Or joy? Happiness? All three, I think. He opened his eyes for a split second, smiling, gripping my fingers with his chubby hands.

I knew right then and there, that I would protect him forever. I promised him. I have definitely kept that promise.

Once Prescott was sitting on the couch. He was about to fall off the front when I took hold of his arm and yanked him back up. Another time I saved him was when he was getting into the dishwasher. We do have a baby lock on it, but he is really smart and figured out how to open it. When Prescott gets into trouble he gets very quiet, which he was. He had opened the dishwasher and taken out the biggest knife, when my mom and I went over and quickly took the knife away from him.

When I promised to protect him the day he was born, I meant it. Ever since that day, I have felt a responsibility to protect him and care for him, so I have.

To this day he is a healthy, chubby baby. He runs about, getting into whatever is in his reach. He says many words and can copy the things we say. When I found out he was going to be born, I loved him instantly. I couldn't stop thinking about what life would be like with a new baby. I expected that we would have a lot of changes. But what I didn't expect was what he thinks of Evan and I. He thinks the world of us, and we think the same of him. He is my everything. My world turns for him. I love you, Prescott.

Brooklynne Hubbard
Beaver Creek, MN
2nd Place

One Small Farm

Hi! I live on a farm that is very small compared to my neighbors' huge, famous farms. On my farm we have four pigs. We got them all from my aunt. They are all girls except for my little sister's pig, Elizabeth. My pig has a few spots and is named Hamy. My big brother's pig reminds me of a bulldog. Some people would say it looks like a gorilla. So my brother named it Gorilla. Our last pig, Hillary, is a rare kind of pig that has curly hair. We all share Hillary.

We have three calves that we got last summer. They are pretty big, almost full bulls! We had four but one died. The oldest calf/bull is Bunny; he is my sister's. She always names her pets funny names. My calf/bull is the second one. His name is Mohak because when we got him he had a small mohawk! The last calf, which is still pretty young, belongs to my brother. Baller is his name because he was bawling a lot when he came to live on our farm.

Next we have the best dog in the world! He answers to Max and is the same age as my sister. He is very hyper. My dad and brother like to take him hunting. Max helps by running and scaring the pheasants so my dad or brother can shoot them.

Every farm needs cats! We have five cats. Our oldest cat is 11-years-old, just like me. Her name is Quper. When my sister was younger she would call him, "Pooper!" Next is my brother's cat, Pirate. She has some fur that covers her eye to make it look like an eye patch. Then there are the adorable kittens! Mine is all black, a boy named Don. My brother's

other cat is a calico named Smalls because she is so small!
Finally, my sister's calico is named Hypertroia.

We also have a lot of rabbits that I can't name because there are far too many of them. We share our farm with lots of other critters and stray cats, but that is what makes it my farm.

POETRY
Grades 7 & 8

Rosaura Esquivel
Worthington, MN
1st Place

The Japan Man

Lonely, loser, failure they call me
Pennies, nickels, a left over dime
But they don't care, they just waste their time
hungry, garbage, I never eat
I just get walked over like a piece of concrete
Help help says my sign
But for all that happens I never whine
Kicked on, spit on, treated worse than a dog
"Get a job you loser," "What a failure," I would always hear
Broken, bleeding, full of sorrow, as children watch in fear
Giggling, laughing, kids daring one another to touch me
As they all say, I'm annoying as a flea
As I shed a tear in disbelief
Is this who I'm meant to be?
Thinking, wondering, very confused
Hobo, hobo, the homeless man
That's when I thought of a plan
Carrying, packing full of confidence
This plan could've been dense
That didn't matter, it had to be done
Finally made it at a stop
As the train rolled, and ran
He knew he had to hop
Once on the train, was a tired and happy man
Far away, very far, goodbye Japan!

Myah Leigh Johnson
Willmar, MN
2nd Place

Vulnerable Beauty

the antique shop my grandma used to take me to
had multiple lost items
but only one stood out to me.
a glint of gold caught the corner of my eye,
a gold barely able to stand out
from the rust that covers it
but nothing, not even rust,
can diminish its beauty.
a gold jewelry box,
with roses etched over the top
now colored with age
sits in a ray of sunlight
the dust dancing in the sunbeam
like the leaves of fall
resting peacefully on the ground
vulnerable but beautiful.
i cradle it, my fingers sliding
over the engravings
delicately
gracefully
intricately,
feeling my nail trace through soft dust.
i blow it off, the particles floating
through the musty air.
A faint sense of early spring
drifts through the room
and i smell the roses
that cover the surface.

i marvel over the memories
it could clutch in its crevices.
was it owned by a girl like me?
passed through generations of families?
i begged it to tell me, but it would not.
i could only wonder over the secrets it might hold.
maybe one day I'll hold the key to reveal its stories.
but for now,
i can only appreciate its
vulnerable beauty.

Evangelina Garcia
Worthington, MN
3rd Place

Save Our Earth

The earth is dying and no one sees
We are young and no one believes
Our forests are burning into ash in a second
Ask California they'll tell you about how
They lost all their homes
Factories working and toxins emitting
Chemicals spreading while we're trying to breathe
Our future is gone and we are the reason
The sea level is rising
And icebergs are melting
The tiger is almost gone and almost extinct
Don't go crying when your fur coat ain't clean
Keep this up and maybe we too will be extinct
At this rate I don't think we're gonna survive
If you end up with this 2045 I just wanna say
I'm sorry

FICTION
Grades 7 & 8

Elizabeth Eisma
Edgerton, MN
1st Place

The Jewish Family

We sat there shivering. The cold cement walls were chilling to the touch. Even with the warmth of my parent's arms wrapped around me, and my little brother pressed against me, it was still cold as ice. The soldiers' boots could be heard echoing above us coming closer and closer until they stopped right overhead. I didn't dare breathe for fear of them hearing us. The only sound that could be heard was the pounding of my heart when suddenly out of the silence a voice from right above us rang out:

"I don't see anything."

The next voice came from a little farther away but could be heard just as clearly.

"I don't either. What a waste of time!"

"Why do we have to do these searches anyways?" the soldier that was by us complained as his voice began receding from above us.

I let out a quiet sigh of relief as the door slammed shut upstairs. I stared into the darkness. I wished our family wasn't Jewish. If we weren't we would still be at our house. How I missed our house. I missed waking up to warm toast and jam. I even missed my chores.

It all ended one day while we were at home, and my father came home with a letter. He said that we needed to move. I found out later that it was because Jews were no longer allowed to own property. We moved in with a man that worked with my father, Mr. Meyer. It was nice but not the same.

We had been living with Mr. Meyer for over a year. Things had gotten much worse. Jews were now being hunted. Most of the Jews had already been found and taken. No one knew exactly where they were taken, but I had heard some horrible rumors. Our family was lucky enough to find somewhere to hide. A lot of families were taken before they even knew what was happening.

That brings us back to here in this dark damp basement. The screeching of bedposts along the floor brought me back to reality. An almost blinding light shone through a crack in the ceiling. A man began descending the old wooden ladder leaning against the wall. My dad rushed to stabilize it for him. As the man reached the bottom of the ladder, my brother, Ezra, sprung up to greet him.

“Do you have any food mister?” he said with an eager voice.

How could he think of food at a time like this? I supposed I couldn’t blame him too much. It had been a whole day since we had eaten because of the constant Nazi patrols.

“I do have food, but it is not much. The Nazis have begun to watch how much food we get to make sure we are not feeding Jews.”

I watched as he pulled the small loaf of bread out of his pocket. The smile on my brother’s face dropped. There was only enough for each of us to have one bite. I was grateful, but it was no toast with jam. My father let out a sigh.

“We can’t keep living like this,” he declared. “We need to get out of Germany.”

I could see in Mr. Meyer’s face that he did not think this was a good idea.

“I agree.”

Everyone turned to look at my mom who had been quietly standing in the corner until now.

“The longer we wait the harder it will get. It is only a matter of time before they catch us if we stay here.”

I couldn't tell if I was more relieved or terrified. I was thankful that we would get out of this old basement and into the sun, but the thought of going out there where the Nazis could grab us at any moment, and we would just be gone, made me shiver. Another thought was running through my mind. It was the most frightening of them all, and I didn't even want to think about it. What if we were separated? What if they took Mother and Father away and left Ezra and I? What if they just took me from everyone? Just thinking about it made me want to run, grab my mom's hand, hold on, and never let go.

“What do you think, Mr. Meyer? We haven't been out for a while.”

Mr. Meyer responded with a grave tone, “I do not like the idea, but I suppose it must be done. Leave tonight at 7:00 p.m. Many of the guards will be on break for supper, and it will be partially dark.”

“Thank you, Mr. Meyer. Without you we never would have made it this far,” my father gratefully replied.

So that night at 6:50, my family prepared to leave. Mr. Meyer had brought us food for the journey. At first, father refused to take it because he knew it was all of Mr. Meyer's food for the day. Mr. Meyer also gave us a few blankets for the journey.

It was finally time to come out of the basement. After spending over a week in there, I was more than ready. We went up the ladder one by one. Father went first, then Mother. Ezra went third, and I was last. Poking my head through that trap door was like stepping into a new world. The light was so bright that I couldn't even see. I never thought I would be so happy to see plants again. I imagine I looked like a little child seeing snow for the first time. For a

split second, I forgot that we were Jews, and I forgot that we were being hunted. Then it all came back. The green plants didn't seem so beautiful anymore as I thought of the sound of the soldiers' boots.

We all said our farewells to Mr. Meyers and left. It was still relatively light out. The streets were deserted. Only one guard stood at the end of the neighborhood. We knew there was a forest on the edge of town. That was where we were headed. My father led us through the maze of houses. I tried to keep track of where we were going, but we were moving too quickly and took too many turns. We ran for a full thirty minutes.

Ezra began getting tired so we stopped for a moment. My father wanted to keep going at a slower pace, but Mom said that we needed a rest. We hid under a tall pine tree. I was breathing very hard and loud so trying to stop was difficult. After five minutes went by, we were on our way again. We were able to move fairly quickly, and we only passed a few guards. The forest was beginning to come into view. Its huge green branches began peeking over the edge of the houses. Seeing the forest gave me hope, and I ran with a new strength again. It got darker and darker as we ran. I began getting hard to see my father running in front of me. We were right across the street from the forest. It was pitch black.

I heard my mom whisper behind me, "Everyone hold hands, so we don't lose each other."

Ezra's hand wrapped tightly around mine. I reached out for my father's, but no one reached back.

I thought at first that he just didn't hear mom so I whispered, "Dad, we need to hold hands."

No one responded. I ran forward in fear, letting go of Ezra's hand. I couldn't find my father. Desperately, I ran around trying to find him. I became so scared I began trying

to call for him in a whisper. No one answered. I eventually stopped, exhausted. That was when I realized what I had done. Not only had I lost my father, but I had run away from my mother and brother. I was all alone in the pitch black darkness with no idea where I was. Without even thinking about it, tears began to roll down my cheeks. A large hand came out of the darkness and grabbed my shoulder. The hand was icy cold.

“Dad!” I cried out in relief.

It was when the figure grabbed my two hands that I realized what was happening.

“Help!” I cried out in desperation. “Somebody help me!”

The cold hand covered my mouth to gag me.

“Don’t speak and don’t move,” came the voice of the figure.

The next thing I knew I was thrown into the back of a car. The man had tied my hands and feet. I sat there silently as I bumped around the car. I had no idea where I was going. Eventually my exhaustion overcame me and I fell asleep.

I woke up in a train car. As I glanced around me, I saw many other women and children. My guess was that they were all Jews. As I looked around, I saw my mom. I leapt up and rushed over to her. Next to her was Ezra! Once again, father was missing.

“Where is Father?” I inquired.

“We do not know. Ezra and I were waiting for you and Father to go when suddenly you broke off from Ezra and ran away. We looked for you until two guards came up behind us and took us. They must have knocked us out because we woke up here.”

For three long days, everyone was crammed in the train with nothing to do. They didn’t feed us anything, but they gave us water once a day. We assumed that there was another cart for the men, and that was where Father was.

On the third day, the cart finally stopped. A huge door opened. Guards stood right outside the door pointing guns at us. They forced us to form a single line as we left the cart. The men could be seen filing out of their cart. A little girl shouted out, "Daddy!" as she saw the line of men. She ran out of the line. Before she got close to the men's line, a piercing bang echoed through the air. The girl fell down, and everyone kept moving like nothing had happened.

There was a large fence surrounding us with barbed wire across the top. There were multiple buildings all around us. As we walked, screams could be heard all around. They took us to a large building. The floor was concrete, and there was just one large room. People were scattered throughout the room. Once again, all of them were women and children. After everyone was in, they closed the door. There was no way out. I looked around and saw families huddled together sobbing. Many of them had wounds and gashes. One girl even had burns all across her body. How could people do this? Mom led us towards a corner with less people, and we all sat down. The guards took our blankets from us, so we only had each other to keep warm.

After an hour of imagining all the horrible things they could do to us, guards came in and rounded half of us up. We were part of the half. They told us it was time for showers, but when they said it they laughed and sneered. I had a feeling these showers were going to be painful. They forced us into chambers with clear walls all around us. There was one showerhead and nothing else. I was shaking in fear of what might come out of that showerhead. This could be the end. It could kill me. Would that even be the worst thing? If it killed me, I wouldn't have to worry about all the other pains and sorrows of this life. I thought about all the families in that room crying, and realized I couldn't put my family through that. My questioning ended when one of the showers

three down from me filled with a green gas. The fumes spread all around the room until all I could see was the gas. Only one scream was heard from the shower. The green gas receded, and there she was a little girl no older than six curled up on the floor lifeless. The same thing happened in the next shower. I watched in terror waiting for it to happen to the shower right next to me. When it came time for the gas to come, water came instead. The woman in the stall sat there stunned as the cool stream hit her.

It was my turn. Out of that showerhead could come one of two things: regular water or poisonous gas. Now was the moment of truth. The showerhead rattled a little bit, and then a cool stream of water flowed out. I should have felt relieved, but I didn't. My only thoughts were of my mom who was four showers down from me. I watched in horror as all of the women leading up to my mom got gas. Please, let her get water. I think my heart stopped when my mom's turn came. My mom stood there. Her face white, but it still looked strong and determined.

"No!" I screamed as green gas filled my mother's shower.

I cried as I slammed my fist against the glass of my shower. The last thing I saw of her was her lips mouthing the words, "I love you." Ten more people went after my mother, but I don't remember what happened to them. The Nazis lined us up and took us back to the large cement room. I found Ezra waiting for me in the same corner where we had first settled.

"Where is Mom?" he asked as tears formed in his eyes.

"Gone," I replied.

I sat down and hugged him. We stayed like that the rest of the night. It was very cold without mom's arms wrapped around us. We were alone.

Taylor Post
Woodstock, MN
2nd Place

Refuge for Iman

“**I**man!” my mother shouted my name. “You cannot wait any longer. You must run, and do not fret over me! Leave, now!”

I tried not to look back as I followed the others, running for our lives from the Syrian rebels. They had attacked the center of our village around 3:00 a.m., and had only spread to the rest of the community since then. My mother had gone out to see what all the noise was about. At the same time, the rebels had just made their way to our section of the village. By the time I heard the noise and woke up, she had already been captured and interrogated.

My father was away on a trip to smuggle Bibles into the village, so that left me, a 14 year-old girl, alone. I was afraid as I watched the torture of my mother from a distance, knowing the terrorists had found our family’s secret. The extremists had a brown Bible with pink engravings in their hand. It was my precious bible, the one I worked so hard to get a hold of. The one I waited to be secretly passed to me for over a year. And now, my mother was being punished for my carelessness in hiding this illegal book.

I tried to clear my mind as I ran, to pray for my mother, but the chaos only increased. I saw children holding their infant siblings as they ran. Mothers searching for their lost sons and daughters. Only the feeling of fear kept me moving.

We were still running after what seemed like days. I had no clue where we were headed, but I followed the small crowd, hoping safety was ahead. I knew we were far enough

from the village to slow down, so I began to talk to the mother beside me.

“Do you have an idea where safety might be?” I ask her as she held her little daughter’s hand.

“There is a safe place in Gaziantep, a town inside the south-eastern border of Turkey,” she replied. “That is where I am headed. I was expecting for an attack to happen soon, and I know some of my family from Kobani might be staying there.”

I asked a couple others the same question, and most of them didn’t have a clue where they were going to stay. We eventually got word from the front of the scattered group that we would soon set up a “camp” for the night, near the outskirts of a close-by town. It seemed like a good idea, considering that the sun was beginning to set, but none of us had anything. Only a few people in our small group had time to gather supplies before the attack. I expected there to be more people that could share food and drink, but I remembered that many other families had left days, weeks, or even months earlier after hearing of this awful evil spreading in our land.

I realized I hadn’t made up my mind about where I was to go. This one decision would determine the rest of my life. It could be my home for many years to come. It would affect my schooling, which my parents had cared so dearly about. Instead of worrying, I tried to do the one thing I always do when I don’t know what to think—pray.

“Miss,” a young boy’s whisper woke me from my prayer. “My mother would like to know if you would like to stay by us tonight. We notice that you are alone, and we have packed a few things to share.”

“Oh, thank you!” I replied. “ I would like that very much!”

I watched as the child showed me to his family. His mother happened to be the same kind lady I had talked to earlier about the plans she had. It was an answer to my prayers! I could go with this family and help with the two small children.

“Hello, ma’am,” I cheerfully greeted. “I’m so very grateful for your offer. You have no clue how hard it has been to be out here all alone. I believe I talked to you earlier about your plans to travel to Turkey.”

“Yes, I remember our conversation. I figured you were alone and sent my boy to find you,” she said. “What is your name?”

“My name is Iman,” I replied.

“I am Rima, and this is my daughter, Amira,” she pointed to the toddler who I saw holding her hand earlier. “My boy’s name is Karam, meaning generosity. I see more and more of the meaning of his name show through him. He was so excited when I told him to call you over. My husband, Jamal, was away when the rebels came.”

Her eyes and face became sad and grey when she mentioned her husband.

“My name means faith. It’s the only thing I’m holding onto in this treacherous time. I know how you feel about your husband being gone. After all, my father was away on a trip when the attack began, too.”

“Faith... I like that meaning. Only my faith in Jesus has helped me through this hard time.”

When I heard this, I celebrated within my heart. It was very rare that I could share this religion with someone inside my close community. We continued to talk, and eventually figured out that my father and her husband were on the same dangerous trip to smuggle Bibles. I couldn’t believe the connections! I knew God was calling me to go with this family.

Rima began to prepare a few things to eat. As I waited, my mind wandered to the one thing I didn't want to think about. I wondered where my mother was and the kind of torture she was facing because of my mistake. If only I hadn't been so careless, I could've saved her. She could be being beaten, imprisoned, or even dead, all because of me.

I thought about my father and if he had received word of the attack. Would he come home expecting to see his wife and child? I didn't want to think anymore.

Rima told me that the food was ready. We came together with a couple other travelers, but there were few things any of us could spare. I broke apart a piece of my small banana for little Amira, who seemed to always be by my side since we stopped. After we were done eating our "meal," I began telling Rima of my plans.

"I would like to follow your family to Turkey. I feel God had us meet for a reason, and I thank Him for how welcoming you were to me. If this is okay, I would love to help with your children along the journey. I am an only child and have never gotten a chance to take care of younger kids."

"Of course it's okay! I have been very distraught about how I would take care of my family without my husband along the way. You are an answer to my prayers!" Rima rejoiced.

We prayed together after this. Then, we gathered all random scraps collected along the way to create somewhere to sleep during the night. I said Leyla Saida—goodnight—to Amira and Karam, and lay down. I fell asleep immediately, exhausted from the terrors of the day.

Honk, Honk! I woke to a large truck, full of travelers, driving along the outskirts of the town we were camped by. I saw some people from our group trying to hitch a ride by

jumping on and slinging their luggage to the back of the vehicle. The sun was just rising and lots of others were awake, too. I knew it was time to pack up our scarce belongings and set out on the road again. We got ready and our then even-smaller group set out toward the north. Sabah alkyr!” I said good morning to my new traveling family as we start walking.

It was a hot day, but the traveling was less boring than the day before. Today, we saw many towns and stopped numerous times to get cheap goods and maps for the journey. Some villages and even small cities had ruins from similar attacks to ours. Many citizens from towns who had not yet been attacked joined us before it was too late. We took a few breaks throughout the day to rest and rejuvenate for even more walking.

I worried as we approached the border, knowing we had no passports, but Rima seemed confident. I helped with Amira and Kaman, as she took care of our passage through to Turkey by talking to the guards at the entrance. We were soon safely inside of Turkey.

Many times along the way people had called us refugees. The thought never crossed my mind that that is what we were. I would have never dreamed of being someone fleeing my home country, Syria, where I grew up, learned life lessons, and made all my friends. Many of those friends I would never see again. I tried to put my worries and fears to the back of my mind.

Rima, I, and the other “refugees” decided to settle for the night near a small village. Tonight was very similar to the last night on the road. We shared what we had, made temporary sleeping places, and said goodnight.

“Tomorrow will be the day we will have to break off from most of the others and head towards Gaziantep,” Rima whispered as we lay down.

I whispered an “okay” and shut my eyes.

I woke to soreness and pain from walking and the familiar sounds of village life—farmers leading cows to graze, chickens roaming through yards and streets, and babies crying, telling their mothers they were awake. Another day of walking began. Rima recovered our map and figured we would be to Gaziantep by the night. I was glad we were close, as we had already walked so far in the last two days! I couldn’t imagine the journeys of the people who had to flee from a country that surrounded by other terrorists.

We walked for hours, with only short breaks throughout the day. I sensed that everyone was anxious to get to their destination and finally settle.

The day flew by, and soon, around sunset, we could see Gaziantep in the distance. Everyone’s spirits seemed to be up now. I felt happy at first, but realized this would only be temporary. We were all going to have to eventually move from there and find a permanent home again.

As we entered the camp, more chaos engulfed us. Children were shouting as they played a game of soccer, mothers were preparing food for the evening meal, and other new refugees were trying to set up. I felt a little overwhelmed, knowing that this place would be my home for a long while. I was so glad I had Rima to guide me through getting here.

A fellow who seemed to know his way around led us to an open area of dirt. This spot was to be ours. I helped prepare our tiny shack with the supplies we found and bought along the way. Even with the familiar things, I did not feel at home. Home was where my mother and father were, and I couldn’t help but think about them. I knew I would have to find them, sooner or later, whether my mother was still alive or not.

Karam helped his mother start the fire we shared with our neighbors for the meal. When the potatoes, onions, and peppers finished cooking, we sit down to eat. I said a prayer of thanks for the food. For the first time in a while, I felt completely full. I was exhausted, once again, and decided to go straight to bed. I tried to shut my eyes, but tonight, I did not fall asleep right away like I did before.

I thought about how I would have to find my parents again. I wished Rima could help me, but this would be too dangerous for her two little children. There was a chance I might not find them, but I had to try. I decided that I would tell Rima of my plans the next day, and leave the day after that to search. The sooner, the better, I thought.

Amira's innocent laugh woke me out my hard sleep. My legs and neck were even more sore today, and I didn't want to get out of bed.

I walked over to Rima to tell her of my plans, but she began talking first.

"I thought I should let you know that my husband has sent me word that he and all the other men on the mission are safe. I don't know how he found out, but someone must have told him of how our village was raided, and he wanted to make sure we were safe. I plan on sending him a message back telling him where we are. That way your father can find you also."

"That is such great news!" I said with the most excitement I'd had in days. "I was just going to tell you how I wanted to find my parents soon, but God answered another prayer!"

We rejoiced and worked together to write a letter to send to the town where both our family members were staying currently. Rima was gone for the rest of the day, searching for a temporary job. I took care of Amira and Karam, and

we met some other kids from similar situations as ours. We had fun playing made-up games with them until their parents returned.

Days passed by similar to the one before. Rima always brought back just enough money to buy us the food we needed. Her children and I grew closer, and I found out what it meant to be a big sister. I always wondered when my letter to my father would be returned with one from him.

Today, I was rinsing Amira's hands in our small pail of water, when a group of men seemed to be approaching our encampment. A familiar sense of fear rushed through me as I feared they were the ones who ruined my home. Just when I was about to pick up Amira and run to a different spot, I saw that one of the men was my father! There was another man beside him who could only be Rima's husband. He had the same smile as Karam. The kids and I ran to our fathers, hugging them harder than we ever had before.

"I am so glad to see you!" my father delighted.

I thought the same, but didn't want to let go of his strong arms.

"Have you had any word from mother?" was my first question to my dad.

"You mean that beautiful lady walking here now?" he replied, as I turned to see a woman with long, braided hair coming our way.

I couldn't believe my eyes, and I heard the quick, excited beat of my heart as I stood frozen before the one I thought had been killed as my punishment. Tears trickled down my cheeks as I embraced my best friend, my mother. I felt bumps along her neck that she didn't have before. I knew they could only be scars from the worst torture she had ever gone through.

"I'm sorry," was all I could whisper.

“All is forgiven. You were brave, Iman,” she whispered back.

But that didn't matter now. All that mattered was that she was here. She was alive. Our family was together. My journey would never compare to my mother's, but it did teach me more about my own name. “Iman” doesn't just represent my faith, but how God is faithful, when life seems faithless.

Makenzie Pap
Luverne, MN
3rd Place

Rose's Legacy

Nearly every day, I think, *Wow! My life is crazy!* I mean, what 23-year-old is an adoptive mom to 15 children, teaches 93 little kids, AND runs a business making bracelets? But every day, as I feed, clothe, and play with my 15 little, adorable children, I can't imagine doing anything different! I know that my life is permanently connected to these kids who are in a different mood at any given moment. They are crying, laughing, and screaming as they run around the house playing tag, or comforting each other whenever anyone sheds a single tear. I know that my kids are the best example of love in this broken world. It's not perfect, but it is never-ending, caring, and crazy—and that's why I love them!

I guess you can look at it two ways—Jesus ruined my life or He made it *completely perfect*. I never meant to move to the other side of the world or become a single adoptive mom at age 23. My whole life, I dreamed of marrying the perfect Christian guy after I finished college, having a steady job in a small town near my parents, and of raising a family the way my parents raised me. But I'd given my life to Jesus as a child, and I knew He was calling me to something *WAY* different than I had ever dreamed of or imagined.

I first mentioned the idea of becoming a missionary to my parents after I graduated high school when we were talking about what I would go to college for. While I was looking at some flyers, I saw a mission school that sent people all over the world as either missionaries or to start schools for kids. I immediately knew that starting a school for kids around the world was what I wanted to do.

When I first mentioned this to my parents, they didn't believe that I wanted to do this. But once they saw that I was serious, they said that I would need to go to college for two years and get a degree in Missions in order to fulfill this dream. I guess they were hoping that I would just forget about it. I know that it was Jesus who wouldn't let me give it up because I stuck with my dream for two years of college. During this time, I learned the Chewa language, the Swahili language, and also French. I also went on three mission trips: one to Malawi, one to Kenya, and one to Ghana. My parents eventually came to understand that I was serious about this, and they asked me what I was planning to do once I graduated.

I said, "I'm going to go to a country in Africa and start a school there for kids."

They finally saw how serious I was about missions, and began to encourage and support me, although they still questioned why God had chosen this path for me.

I wrote this story because I want to show what miraculous things God can do! He took me, Ellie Bennett, a typical American teenager, and totally altered my life until all I could think about was the amazing children that needed lots of love and care in other countries around the world. I hope that this story will show you that God uses people that are definitely NOT perfect to change the lives of precious children. If God can use me, He can definitely use YOU!

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"Ellie! Mail for you," Mom called.

I raced down the stairs, and tore the envelope of the thick letter off the kitchen counter. Mom and I huddled over the letter, scanning the contents.

"Yes," I screamed, grabbing Mom in a huge hug. "I got my certificate!"

I had recently graduated from Bethel University in Saint Paul, MN with a Master's of Art in Missions. Since I graduated, I'd been waiting for this certificate, which officially certified me to go to a country around the world and start a school for the children there!

Mom grabbed her phone and texted on our family group.

*MOM---Ellie got her certificate!!*

My phone immediately came alive with texts from my family—my dad, my younger sisters Isabel and Clara, my older brother Logan, and my younger brother Cooper.

*DAD---Great job, honey! SO PROUD OF YOU!*

*LOGAN---Wow! Congrats! Keep us updated!*

*ISABEL---YAYY! CAN'T WAIT TO GET HOME!!*

*CLARA---SOOOO lucky! Send me a pic.*

*COOPER---Great Job Sis!*

*ELLIE---Thanks guys! Love u!*

That night, my mom, dad, and I had a big talk about where I was going to go. I had been certified to go anywhere in Africa, so that narrowed it down a little. After a lot of discussion, I decided that I would go to Dowa District in Malawi to start the school. It is a relatively safe country, and I had been there on a mission trip during college. I also decided that I would leave in three weeks, and that Mom and Dad would not come with me to get me settled. They put up a fight about this at first, but they eventually agreed. I would go by plane to a city called Bimpi in Dowa District where I would start my school for the kids.

About a month and one plane ride later, I arrived at the Kamuzu International Airport, which is about an hour from Bimpi. My only baggage was two small suitcases and a purse full of clothes, books, school supplies, and about \$5,000. This money would hopefully buy me a home, a vehicle, clothes, and food. The first thing that hit me as I stepped out of the plane into the run-down airport was the heat. I mean, it

was hot on the airplane, but it was nothing compared to that! It was a stifling 92°F and so humid that you could nearly drink the hot, wet air!

I looked around the small airport for some sort of taxi service, and my eye caught on a sign on a booth that said: **“Rides here! We will bring you anywhere!”** I walked up to the booth.

“How can I help you?” a man asked me as I walked up.

“I’m looking for a ride to Bimpi,” I told him.

“Well, you are in the right place! We charge \$2 per mile. If you are going to Bimpi, it would be \$48,” he replied.

“That sounds great! When will you be able to take me there?” I asked.

“We can leave as soon as you are ready. Shall we go now?”

I nodded my reply.

He led me to a small motorcycle that was pretty much falling apart. The three seats were cracked, the wheels were wiggly, and it rattled when he started it, but it got the job done.

About one short hour later, we started seeing houses. Most of them had dirt walls and straw roofs, but a few were actual wooden houses with siding and things like that. What amazed me the most, though, was all the little kids that were SO skinny and thin. You could see their ribs and the only clothes they had on were rags! Children, about 5-years-old, were working in fields along with 75-year-old people! In small villages, some orphan children begged along the road for money, food, or anything they could get! It broke my heart.

“This is Bimpi,” the man told me as he stopped by some houses in what seemed to be a bigger town. “Do you have someone expecting you, or are you in need of an inn?”

“I need an inn. Do you know of one here?” I asked. He brought me to a small house that said ‘VACANCY’ on the window.

“They should take you in for your stay.”

I thanked him, paid him, and then knocked on the door. A friendly man that looked to be in his 70s answered the door. “My name is Ellie, and I am looking for a place to stay for a few nights,” I smiled at him.

“Of course,” he replied. “My name is Marcus. Please come inside.” He led me through the door. “We charge \$25 a night. Do you know how many nights you will be staying?”

“No,” I admitted. “I’m going to start a school for the kids, but I need to buy a house.”

“Oh my goodness,” Marcus exclaimed. “I heard that you were coming! My wife, Keita, and I are so glad that you decided to come here. There are so many children that need an education, love, and care!”

I nodded as he led me through the house. There was no electricity, but the house was small and homey. Marcus led me to a room and pointed inside.

“This will be your room. Please make yourself at home. Breakfast is at 7:30, dinner is at noon, and supper is at 7:00.”

I thanked him and then started unpacking my things on the bed and in the dresser. I decided I would ask Marcus where I might go to buy a house later.

The next morning after a small breakfast of bread and fruit, Marcus brought me to the market place in the center of town to look for a home. Many people in rags were calling out to us to buy their product. Marcus went up to a man in a booth that said REAL ESTATE and asked in the Chewa language, “Miss Bennett is looking for a home to buy in Bimpi. Can you help her?”

“How big of a house are you looking for?” the man asked me.

“Pretty big. It will be a school, so at least four rooms, if you have that available. I would also like electricity, if that is a possibility,” I replied.

“I will see what I have,” the man stared at me like I was crazy. He bent down into his files, scanning the papers. After a little while he looked up, “Shall we go look at a house?”

After walking about a mile on a long dirt road with no houses on it, he stopped us at a fairly big house that was surrounded by a fence. As we walked inside, he started talking.

“This is the only house that has more than three rooms in it within five miles of Bimpi,” he stated. “It has electricity and running water run by a generator. I’ll give you some time to look around if you are interested.”

“Yes, please,” I walked into the house. The first room inside the door was a kitchen. Down a short hallway to the left was a big bathroom and a small bedroom. The basement and upstairs were just two empty rooms that I could make into a schoolroom and a big bedroom. After looking, I told the salesman that I would think about it.

That night after lots of prayer and thought, I decided that I would buy the house. The man had given me a price that was WAY less than what I had expected, and although it was bigger than I needed, I felt that God wanted me to buy it.

A few nights after I moved into the big house, I was woken up by a loud knock on my front door. I put on a robe and went to answer the door. A man in his late 50s was standing there.

“Miss Bennett?” he asked.

“Yes, that is me. Please come in,” I lead him into the kitchen. After I lit a few candles, we sat down around the table.

“I am Mr. Abara, the pastor in Bimpi. Tonight, a child was brought to me named Rose,” Mr. Abara introduced

himself. “She had a deadly fever about three days ago, but her mother was addicted to alcohol and didn’t bring her in to a doctor. She now has Guillain-Barre syndrome (GBS) as an effect of the fever. This is when your immune system attacks your nerves, leading to muscle weakness or paralysis. She can’t walk and needs lots of care and treatments that require electricity. She still has feeling in her limbs but little movement,” Mr. Abara continued.

“I am wondering if you would be willing to provide your home for care for Rose and her two little sisters until we find a permanent home for them. Rose is nine years old, and the other two girls are five and three. Your house is the only house with electricity near here. My wife is willing to care for them here so they aren’t a burden to you. Would you consider taking on such a matter?”

“Well, of course,” I exclaimed! “But please, don’t trouble yourself with caring for her! I am very willing to care for her and her sisters here!”

“Thank you so much,” Mr. Abara thanked me. “I will bring them over right away!”

By the time Mr. Abara came in with the three sleepy girls, I had three beds made in the upstairs and started a fire so they would be warm.

“What is your name?” I asked the girl that looked to be the middle child.

“My name is Issa. This is my little sister, Alyssa, and my older sister, Rose.”

“My name is Ellie. You can stay with me until Rose is all better,” I gently told her. I knew that Issa, Rose, and Alyssa had seen WAY more evil than a child should ever experience—hunger, abandonment, depression, and much more. Their bodies were skin and bones, but their faces were hopeful and trusting. Mr. Abara carried Rose into the upstairs, and Alyssa clung to me when I picked her up to

bring her up the stairs. When Alyssa thought that she had to sleep alone because there were three beds, she started crying. I hurried to explain that they could sleep together if they wanted to. They all looked so little and helpless lying next to each other in their bed.

“Good night, girls,” I comforted them, turning out the lights and going down the stairs.

“Ellie?!” I heard Alyssa call out. I ran back up the stairs.

“Yes, Alyssa?” I asked.

“Can we call you Mommy?”

My heart MELTED!

“Yes, girls!” I went and gave each of them a hug. “I love you.” I started crying on the way back down the stairs. My heart went out to the girls who had seen so much hunger, grief, suffering, and pain. I knew in that moment that I would do ANYTHING to protect them from any more harm or heartbreak! I loved those girls, and I would do everything I could to become their ‘mommy.’

The next week, when Mr. Abara came back, I asked him if there was any way I could adopt Rose, Alyssa, and Issa.

“Oh my goodness,” he exclaimed. “I just came over to ask you if you would consider doing that! The girls seem to love you, and their mom is not fit to raise them anymore! I think they would love you as their Mommy.”

“Girls!” I found them. They were playing in the walk-in shower. They had never had running water, so they were having a blast! Issa was splashing Rose, who was strapped in a chair to keep her from falling down. Alyssa was laughing as she slipped-and-slid around the tub.

Alyssa and Issa came running right when I called, and I grabbed a towel to wrap them in. I helped Rose into a chair, wrapping her in a towel also. Then I started talking.



“Girls...” I continued, “I was wondering if you would like me to be your Mommy? Then you would live with me and be my little girls.”

All three of them screamed in delight; their faces lit up with precious smiles. Alyssa came over to give me a big hug, and I gently grabbed Issa and Rose into the hug, too.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I beamed!

Ten days later, Rose, Issa, and Alyssa were my adopted children. With their help, I started a school for the children in my downstairs room. Ninety students came to my free introduction, excited to go to school for one day, but sad because almost all of their parents couldn’t pay the required-by-law \$15 operating fee. Without thinking about it, I told the parents that I would pay the fee for all the children! They were SO happy! Many of the uneducated parents knelt down on their knees in front of me, thanking me from their heart and praying God’s ‘greatest, most bestest blessings’ on me. I was SO happy and excited that my school would teach 90 little kids, plus Alyssa, Issa, and Rose.

After everyone had left, it came to me that I didn’t have \$1,395 to pay the fee. I didn’t have any resources to get even \$500 of those dollars! I lay on my bed, crying and praying to God for help! I just knew I was going to have to tell all those excited parents that I couldn’t pay for their children’s school anymore!

Issa came running into my room at that moment. I hurried to cover my tears and asked her what she needed. She didn’t answer but grabbed me by my hand pulling me to the kitchen. Rose was sitting in her chair in the kitchen, smiling proudly as she held up a bracelet! A huge box of string was sitting next to her.

“Look, Mommy!” Rose exclaimed. “I made a bracelet for you from string in my room.”

As I fingered the bracelet, it looked like it was made by a machine! It was SO perfect, without even a single stitch out of place! It looked like a very detailed friendship bracelet that was knotted. There were lots of tiny colored X's on it, with color filling in the spaces. I knew that this bracelet was the answer to my prayers! I could sell these bracelets online for money!

“Oh, it's lovely, Rose! Do you think you could teach me how to make them?” I asked.

For the next few hours, Rose taught me how to make the bracelets. I made a few different colored ones until I had the hang of it. I decided that every day during one hour of the school day, I would teach the older kids how to make and package these bracelets. I called my parents about this idea, and they got Clara and Isabel, my family's online geniuses, to make an online store to sell the bracelets. They called me back the next day, saying that they had the store ready and approved, but they needed a name for the bracelets. When Issa heard of this, she had an idea.

“We should call it Rose's Legacy,” she suggested with a huge smile.

I knew in that moment that 'legacy' was the perfect name for Rose's bracelets. They would share her story of never giving up despite all evil all around the world! Not only that, but they also would provide education for 93 perfect children and a way of life for many parents!

I am SO glad that I came here to Malawi, met Rose and her sisters, and discovered what hidden talents are in so many little kids. I hope that Rose has encouraged you in knowing that you can do absolutely ANYTHING with God's help! He loves and believes in you, and so does she!

**Nonfiction**  
**Grades 7 & 8**



**Mazzi Moore**  
**Hills, MN**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

### **Most Influential President**

“**T**he man who is swimming against the stream knows the strength of it.” These inspirational words were spoken by the 28th President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson. He is widely known for making an appeal to Congress in favor of the women’s suffrage amendment. Additionally, Woodrow Wilson was awarded the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize in 1919 for his efforts towards international peace while working with the League of Nations. Woodrow Wilson is also acknowledged for asking Congress to declare war on Germany after German submarines attacked U.S. merchant ships. This request in April 1917 was the beginning of American participation in World War I. Even though there have been many influential presidents, I believe that Woodrow Wilson is definitely the finest of them all.

Woodrow Wilson played a major role in the fight for women’s suffrage. Although he took part in this movement during his presidency, Woodrow Wilson was not fully supporting the cause until his second term in office. Our president’s sudden validation and support of women’s suffrage was based on the actions he noticed during World War I. He saw women on the home front stepping in for masculine jobs in manufacturing and agricultural positions, while others worked on the war front line as nurses, drivers, and translators. This evidence of women’s capabilities led to Wilson making an address before Congress on behalf of the women’s suffrage movement. The appeal he made on September 30, 1917, helped gain more support in the central

government and nationwide, but it did not bring instant results. Eventually, the Nineteenth Amendment, which prohibits governments from denying the right to vote on the basis of sex, was put into action on August 19, 1920. Though it may not seem like Woodrow Wilson's appeal for women's suffrage had much affect, his support had a substantial influence that helped the amendment eventually move through Congress.

Woodrow Wilson is heavily regarded for his work during World War I. On April 2, 1917, he asked Congress to declare war on Germany after German submarines attacked U.S. ships. By taking this dangerous step, President Wilson led an unprepared and unsure country into a heated war. America had tried to stay out of World War I, but the submersible attack had been too much. The problem for Woodrow Wilson was that he had to convince the people of America that they should support the war effort by purchasing war bonds and rationing food and supplies. In fact, the 28th President did this through propaganda that portrayed the Germans as savage Huns. He hired designers and movie directors to create films, posters, and articles that would convince Americans to help with the war. Despite the criticism from Americans who wanted to stay out of World War I, Woodrow Wilson's dicey decision to enter the war helped the Allies defeat the Central Powers.

The Nobel Peace Prize is one of the most honorable awards a person can receive. This award has been presented to 923 Laureates and 27 organizations since the program's start in 1901, and one such person is the 28<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson. He was awarded this for his efforts toward international peace with the League of Nations. Founded by Woodrow Wilson, the League of Nations was created to ensure world peace after the deaths of millions during the devastating World War I. Woodrow

Wilson's valiant efforts while working for world peace with the League of Nations exhibited how incredible he was.

Woodrow Wilson was an astounding president. His actions taught me that even though it can be difficult to make substantial decisions, they usually pay off in the end. When Woodrow Wilson joined in the fight for women's suffrage and asked Congress to enter World War I, he took significant risks on behalf of our glorious country. In the end, he helped women earn the right to vote and won a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts within the League of Nations. I believe that anyone can learn how to be a better, more successful person if they learn about this man and what he has done for our beautiful country. Truly, I think that Woodrow Wilson was the most influential president, and without him, America would not be the great country she is today.

**Natzali Morales**  
**Worthington, MN**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

### **Not So Fun Night**

“**N**o! I refuse to watch that!” Screamed my youngest stepsister, Kiki as she ran to the kitchen.

“Oh come on, you big baby. It’s not even that scary!” I yelled back as I pointed to the scary movie in hand.

“Yeah, Kiki, why do you gotta make it a big deal?” asked my other stepsister, Chelsea.

“Come on, Kianna!” exclaimed my oldest stepsister, Darian.

“Nooooo! I don’t want to!” screamed Kiki.

It was a cloudy summer day in Florida. My mom was out and my sisters’ dad was on his way back from Tallahassee and wouldn’t be back till early in the morning, so that left us home alone.

Before our argument we rode bikes to the gas station near their remote house. We grabbed snacks and looked for a movie. Kiki pointed out a horror movie and told us we should get it. We asked Kiki if she was okay with watching a scary movie and she confidently said yes. We bought our things and hopped on our bikes. As we got back home it got darker.

“Oooh, I guess we watching it in the dark!” Chelsea teased and poked Kiki’s shoulder. We started to argue about if it was actually scary or not. When we got inside Kiki sat in the kitchen.

“I don’t want to watch it anymore, it looks too scary.”

“I swear, Kiki, if you don’t man up and watch it you’re doing my chores for the rest of the week!” exclaimed Chelsea.



“Why?!? It’s my choice to not watch this!” Kiki screamed.

“You chose it and now you don’t want to watch it?” I asked.

She paused her crying for a while. She looked around.

“Fine, but only if you guys do my chores for the rest of the week and let me hang out with you when you go to the boardwalk,” she finally said,

“Ugh! Deal!” I said.

We went to every bedroom and closet and grabbed all the pillows and blankets we could find, made one gigantic bed, then Darian played the movie.

A couple hours passed by and we all fell asleep. I woke up and glanced at the clock. It was around two in the morning. I looked at my cat Fluffy on top of the couch. He stretched and got up to eat out of his dish. I felt thirsty and got up to get a glass of water out of the kitchen. Chelsea tiredly walked in.

“Hey,” I whispered.

“What time is it?”

“Are you blind? There’s a clock right behind you.”

She turned around to look at the clock but instead of seeing what the time was she looked over at Fluffy. His back was arched and he was hissing and growling at the front door of the house.

“What’s his deal?” asked Chelsea.

“I’m not quite sure,” I said a little weary.

I went over to see what was wrong with him. I sat in front of Fluffy trying to get his attention but he would not break eye contact with the door. His growling started to get louder. I could feel myself tense up.

“Are the blinds shut?” I whispered to Chelsea.

“Yeah.”

“What about the doors? Are they locked?”

“Yeah, why?” she asked with a scared tone in her voice.

I didn’t answer her. Instead I looked out the peephole in the door. All I saw was the porch being lit up by the light outside and the dirt road a few meters away. I tried my best to look over to the right to see any car parked in the driveway. I didn’t see anything but felt that something was wrong.

“Wake everyone up and go to the room,” I said.

“What..? Why?”

“Just do what I tell you!”

She went to the living room and woke up Darian and Kiki. She told them to bring Angel, their cat, with them. Chelsea began to look for her phone in a mountain of blankets.

I ran around the house making sure every door and window was locked. I grabbed Fluffy who was still growling at the door, turned off all the lights and ran into the hallway towards our room. Chelsea came running after, phone in hand. I put Fluffy down and went to lock the door.

“What’s happening?” asked Darian.

I began to explain what happened. Kiki started to cry. Darian sat with her.

“Chelsea, call my mom,” I told her.

“Oh...uh...okay,” she stammered.

She grabbed her phone to call and turned to me with an expression full of fear.

“It’s dead,” she slowly said.

“What?!” I screamed.

No one else had a phone at the time, and we all started to panic. We ran around the room looking for a charger and found an old broken one. She plugged her phone in.

“It’s not working!”

“Bend it a certain way,” I shouted.

She began to bend it and found a position that worked. I told everyone to get in the closet. Just then Kiki's *Monster High* playhouse fell over as if someone had pushed it. I no longer thought it was someone breaking in. Everyone screamed. We couldn't all fit in the closet so we huddled together in the corner of the bunk bed. Then I thought of something.

"Do you guys know The *Lord's Prayer*?" I asked.

"The what?" asked Darian.

"Are you religious? Do you know any prayers?" I annoyingly asked.

"No, we don't go to church," said Chelsea.

I sighed. I was the only one who knew that Prayer. I'm not religious or anything; I learned from Grandma. She taught me over and over again.

I sat up straight from the huddle in the corner of the bunk bed.

"Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo—" I started to say.

"What are you doing?" asked Darian.

"Praying 'cause none of you know it," I yelled back and continued.

I repeated it over and over again till my lungs felt dry.

"Shhhhhh!" Chelsea finally said.

I stopped praying and listened very carefully for what she was so concerned about. Seconds went by till I heard something very faint along the other side of the wall.

I could hear someone slowing scraping at the wall. Kiki screamed and began to cry again. We rushed over to her and calmed her down. Darian reassured that everything would be okay and that their dad would be home soon. Everyone sat back waiting for something to happen. I asked Chelsea if her phone was charged enough to call someone. She got up to grab her phone.

"It didn't work," she disappointingly said.

Not knowing what to do, I sat back down on the bed and thought. An hour passed and nothing else happened. I felt enough confidence to leave the cold room. I got up and walked towards the door and put my hand on the handle. I cautiously opened the door.

The lights were all turned on, even though we had them off. I walked out of the hallway, looking in every room I passed and into the living room. Chelsea started to follow me, so did Darian and Kiki.

The living room was a disaster. Blankets were everywhere, pillows were thrown around and our snacks were spilled.

“It’s 3:30. Your dad should be home soon,” I said.

My sisters looked around to see what else had been moved.

“Well, um, I g-guess we should clean up,” said Darian.

Chelsea ran to her room and grabbed her phone. She plugged it in to her working charger. I turned on the TV and looked for the channel with music so it wouldn’t be so ominous.

We started to clean everything. We folded the mountain of blankets and put them away in the closet, put the pillows back in every room, and vacuumed all the crumbs on the floor.

When we finished we sat on the couch and watched TV. A while later we heard a knock on the back door. We froze. We thought it was all over. No one wanted to go over and check. Then Chelsea’s phone rang. She reached for her phone to answer it.

“Hello?” she said.

“Open this door! I been waiting for you! You said you would be watching when I got here,” he yelled.

She ran to the door, unlocked it and let her dad in. We all rushed over to him and explained what happened. Their

dad was a strong believer in stuff like ghosts and the paranormal. He told us stories about his old house he lived in when he was little and how his mom worked as a tour guide in a haunted jail in St. Augustine.

“Jeez! If I knew about this sooner I would have taken you to Grandma’s!” he said.

“Dad, I don’t want to stay here, please can we go?” asked Kiki.

“Where?” their dad asked.

“Anywhere but here,” said Chelsea.

We ended up staying at their grandma’s house. She wasn’t too happy about us coming over at 4:00 in the morning but glad we felt safe. None of us really went to sleep after that. Nothing major ever happened that summer after that night.

Most people don’t believe this story or think I’m making it up. I mean, I wouldn’t believe it either if someone told me. You never really meet a person who has had stuff like this happen and when you do, it’s kind of hard to believe.

Avery Fey  
Edgerton, MN  
3<sup>rd</sup> Place

### Missing in the Barn Yard

What would you do if a family member disappeared forty years ago? Detectives said there was no hope, but this family member was still missing. This is the question that forty-two-year-old Emily asked herself except she knew the obvious answer. She needed to know what happened to her handicapped grandfather many years ago.

It was a dark, cold, and strangely quiet night. It was December 24, 1979, and the Davis family was gathered around a huge oak table piled high with scrumptious potatoes, gravy, corn, smoked turkey, and way too many flavors of homemade pie. It was Christmas Eve and the kids were running around like chickens with their heads cut off. They beamed at the many colors of shiny paper of green, red, and pearly white.

The kids could hardly wait for the moment when the parents would say, "Time to open gifts!"

This night was especially exciting for the soon to be three-year-old Emily. She and her grandpa were best friends. It was Emily's third birthday, and under the tree was a gift with a beautiful bright red bow addressed from only Grandpa to her. She was the first of fourteen grandchildren to get to open her present. She hastefully tore the paper apart, and found a note that said the gift was outside.

Grandpa Jack quietly snuck out of the house to go get the gift. Suspense was building up inside little Emily. Would it be a puppy, doll, fishing pole, bicycle, or delicious candy?

Ten minutes past and Grandpa had still not come in. Emily was so excited to tear off all that paper just to find her gift.

Then dad whispered to Uncle Dan, "Do you think we should go look for him?"

Emily could sense the uneasy feeling floating around the room.

Uncle Dan hesitantly replied, "We better just to be safe."

Dad and Uncle Dan left the room, and in a quick hurry we all heard the horrendous scream coming from the barnyard.

Grandma, mom, and Aunt Michelle left in a flash. The men were standing outside. We heard a gunshot, then the screech and rumble of tires on the snow-packed gravel. He was gone. The world inside the barnyard seemed to be lurking ghostly. Everything was white. The wind was howling. Everything was empty. Grandpa was gone.

As forty-two-year old Emily rummaged through the piles, mounds and mountains of detective files, she began to cry. She couldn't take it any longer. She was going to find out what happened to her grandfather many years ago.

She had talked to an endless number of different detectives, and they all said it was useless if they didn't have the license plate off the vehicle. This wasn't the answer she wanted. She had to know.

After calling an agent out in Sacramento, California, she finally had someone to investigate her case. They went back to the farm where this all happened forty years ago on that dark and spooky night. Every time she went back it seemed like someone came and haunted her mind.

She squirmed and thought to herself, "This might be the time to find out what happened to my grandpa."

They wandered and wandered until they found something strange. This made her mind go wild. This was the truck that had driven away. This was the truck that she had spent her whole life trying to find. This was her answer.

The next day, Emily and Detective R.J. Adams went back to the scene, and they called a tow truck to come get the truck. They investigated the truck, ran tests, searched the web, and later found out whose truck it was. The truck belonged to Charles Manson. The evil criminal who led the Manson family in the California desert. They later found that he was already in jail, and had been for many years.

Emily was glad that they had found the source of why Grandpa went missing. And to this day, that beautiful fishing pole that she got that night is still her prized possession.



**POETRY**  
**Grades 9 & 10**



**Kate Janzen**  
**Jackson, MN**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

### **In Reality**

Children laugh, they play — together  
Mostly. You see them everywhere,  
At the playground, in the street, or in the yard,  
A multitude running and laughing as one crowd.

But sometimes, You may see one child  
Alone — well, in appearance alone.  
But in reality, she is far, very far,  
From loneliness.

You notice how she moves her mouth,  
She must be talking, of course, but to  
Whom? The nearest person is down the street.  
Maybe, You decide, she's chattering with a creature:  
A rat or bug or cat.

But in reality, the darling child is not  
Talking with a rat or bug or cat, but with herself.  
Or not herself, rather, but to her Mind.

Now You see how she runs and jumps, completely carefree  
And oblivious to all around her. Then You see  
Her arms lift up as her legs pound into the ground  
Harder and faster. Her eyes light up as she moves  
Quicker, stronger. Again, You are confused.

Not running, not jumping. In reality the child  
Chases and tags. In reality the girl

Flies and soars. She never stops, instead  
She rushes on in joy and in excitement.

Other children are nearing, You not only see but also  
Hear the shouts of glee and cheer. You see, as they pass,  
The child. Alone. You wonder, "Will she go join them?"  
She does not go. She remains alone.

But then You realize. Even as the  
Little girl stands there by herself, You know  
She is not lonely. In reality,  
The child is never alone.

**Astya Black**  
**Tracy, MN**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

**Nightlight**

from the night i pluck the stars,  
a selfish man am i,  
to keep their lights locked in a jar,  
and steal them from the sky.

for you my love,  
i'd steal the stars, the moon and saturn too,  
to give you all the light thereof,  
and make a nightlight just for you.

**Jaden Scholl**  
**Westbrook, MN**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

### **First Dance**

The first slow song was the sweetest.  
And so was the thought that I had to tell you where to hold me.  
Held awkwardly by your shoulders and my hips,  
we swayed to Ed Sheeran reminiscing about a perfect girl.

Instead of dancing in awkward silence,  
I pointed to all of the couples dancing along side of us and I  
told you  
how sweet it is how people let down their walls to allow  
someone special to them  
to step in close,

When all of the other dancing feet is just  
background music to their embrace.  
Eyes capturing faces and hands grasping lovers.  
All of those familiar faces I knew,  
holding each other up as if their legs weren't strong enough  
to keep them standing.

So,  
When the next slow song crept to a  
Slight crescendo,  
I stepped a little closer,  
holding the back of your neck.  
Who knew I would leave too soon, missing the final song  
of the night.

Leaving your arms empty,  
your feet still.  
I wish we could have shared  
that last dance,  
together.





**FICTION**  
**Grades 9 & 10**



**Elizabeth Wiggins**  
**Walnut Grove, MN**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

### **Bookcase Number Nine**

**D**addy always said not to play with guns. He would sit me down on the little, white, paint-chipped stool in the cozy corner of our kitchen. He would look me in the eyes and tell me sad tales of lost limbs and lives consumed by these man-made machines of mass destruction. The paint chips scratched at my thighs and I would sit and pick them right off. Scraping and peeling the paint with my fingernails, blossoming into the shapes of animals, letters, and flowers. He would tell me of the horrors of his job: assaults, murders, and shootings.

He would say, “Jude, if you are ever stuck in a situation where you need my help, I will always be there.”

I never thought I would need his help until now. I need my Dad. I need my Daddy to come save me and make this all end... because for the past twenty minutes or so, I have been sitting face to face with the gunman who has killed seven students, two teachers, and one security guard.

September 13, 2019. Band. Choir. Algebra II. Novels. Lunch. Photography. And last but certainly not least World History. Our school is small—I mean small in the sense that everybody knows everyones’ business, but big enough that nobody really cares. I mean I didn’t know him. I said “Hi!” once in a while, gave a high five. We were even biology partners for a semester, but I mean, he wasn’t my best friend. Right now I am hiding in between the bookshelves in our library. *POP. POP. POP.* Three sharp pops followed by a slight shriek, and we once again return to silence.

There are two entry points to the library. The main entry is the front door. It leads straight into the Senior hallway where most of the foot traffic is. However, for me, no. No, no, no, I use the service door. On the other side of the library behind the checkout kiosk is a little metal door with a long skinny green glass window. It always reminds me of the old Coke bottles my Mom used to collect. Well, that door leads into the janitor's room two hallways over. I like to think it's my little secret, yet I know most of the introverts, burnouts, and emo kids go this way.

Twenty feet from the library's main door are the four rows of long, skinny oak tables with those techy-built-in outlets for computers, vandalized with the angst and pencil lead of our high school youth. Names, profanity, and test answers etched all along the worn and torn pieces of wood. Beyond that are fifteen rows of bookshelves; the sixth from the back is my favorite. The thriller/mystery section: R.L. Stine, Dean Koontz, and Stephen King. I could just melt into their words. I wish...

*BANG!* The library door slams open, and I hear a girl start to cry. Mr. Stevens, the librarian, has shut off all the lights and computers. What good will that do? She won't stop crying. I feel bad because I know she will be next. *Squeak, squeak, squeeeak.* I can hear his wet tennis shoes on the tile. He moves a chair, then... nothing. She starts to cry again. She is speaking, but I can't see her. I am too far away and the lights are off. Too dark but I can hear; I can hear the pleas, the hopes, the begging, and *CRACK!* A quick flash of light. A half of a second even, yet it lights the whole room. I can see half of the freshman class piled under the vandalized tables. I can see our student body president under the card catalog, a couple pot heads trying to pry open the little metal door with the skinny green glass window the color of old Coke bottles.

Like a Polaroid camera, I capture their faces in the quick and fleeting, yet brilliant flash of light, compiling them all in the manila folders inside my head. I see her. A heart wrenching sob escapes her throat as she covers her face with trembling hands. Her mascara, like after a great rain, makes muddy little tracks down her porcelain, freckled skin. Crying again, it never ends. I mean if anything is coming to an end, it is Poppy's life in the arms of her sister trying to hide behind a library cart.

Poppy and Ruby. I always thought they were adorable. Everyone called them 'the twins' because they were the literal human embodiment of the word identical. Their pale skin dusted with rusty freckles, red hair like copper cascading in coils down their backs. Their grey eyes, like wild dogs, always alert and jaunting. Honestly I could never tell them apart. Ruby was dating the flyer of the Northridge cheer squad, our bitter rivals. And Poppy was headed straight to the Army starting with the ROTC program, not a place for America's next top model.

A.L.I.C.E. *They* teach us this in case of a school shooter; excuse me, *they* prefer the term armed intruder. Alert. Lockdown. Inform. Confront. Evacuate. BANG! BANG! It's closer now; I can see him. I wonder why all school shooters are men. Why they are all white? Journalism at its finest, I think to myself before I realize that I have been sitting on the floor of bookcase number nine for about twenty minutes now. We have been in a lockdown for twenty minutes.

There he is. Logan Linestein. My 5th grade crush, trying to squeeze into the crack between the wall and a computer cart. I mean as far as stereotypes go, he is not one. A piano prodigy and the lineman of the football team. Six foot, two hundred and fifty pounds, he is our football team's secret weapon. Yet when that boy sat down at the piano bench, it was like he floated. Chopin's Étude Op. 10 No. 4? Piece of

cake. Scriabin's Sonata No. 5? Easy-peasy. I would walk by the choir room once-in-awhile and would hear him play, it's beautiful. He is beautiful. Juilliard, that boy was getting into Juilliard, and now he isn't even going to brush his teeth in the morning because like the Grim Reaper himself, the gunman drifts around the room swiftly, ending the lives of the innocent.

One book falls. It hits the floor with a bang. It's navy blue dust cover flying across the room in the process. It's Stephen King's *The Regulators*, which is ironic because it is about a group of people driving down the same street over and over shooting it up with machine guns and weapons of war. I pick it up, its cover stained and distressed. The corner's bent and ripped off, I run my fingers over the soft yet firm pages of the book realizing it will be my last. Another book drops and hits the floor with a *boom*. Then, another, and another, and another, another, another, another. Book after book after book. All around me, he is here in my head. I am surrounded, and there is no escape for me. He will kill me, and this will be my end. I look up, and he is here.

So, when I say the word school shooter, what is the first thing to pop into your head? A white dude dressed in all black? A trench coat and combat boots? You all think he's a depressed and suicidal, angsty teen with one or no friends. A burnout, loser, misfit, rebel, weirdo, homo. That kid that nobody notices. I look up from my starry-eyed daze, and he is looking at me. Blood splatters his face and clothes. Sweating profusely, he looks down at me. Captain of the speech team, sits the bench on the varsity basketball team, plays the drumline in the high school band, and is the catcher on the baseball team. His squeaky orange high top Converse are covered in blood. His blue hoodie is tucked into his jet black joggers with the Nike swoosh halfway up his thigh.

You would never think this boy looking me straight in the eyes is a psychopath.

“Have I seen you around?” He looks me up and down. I freeze as he squats to get eye level with me. As he waits for my response, he picks up his sawed-off pump-action and re-fills it looking through the sights, pointing it at me. He sets it down and picks up his other M16 military issued automatic rifle and loads it.

I am dizzy again; a part of me just wants him to end it. Get it over with just so he will stop playing games with my head.

“Hey!” he says looking surprised. “You’re the girl who knocked over the soda fountain at prom, right?”

I begin to feel all the blood in my body flood into my face, and I let out a nervous little chuckle. “Yeah, yeah that’s me.”

“What’s your name again?” he asks tilting his head like a lost dog.

“J-Jude, Jude Ashton, I’m a Sophomore.” I stumble over what to say, not wanting to say too much.

“Hey, Jude,” he whispers. He starts to giggle and hums the chorus to *Hey Jude* by the Beatles. His giggle haunts me. It echoes through my mind, bouncing off the walls I have been putting up over the years I have spent roaming this earth. The crawling imprint of maggots on my thighs from the scratchy stained white carpet below me have begun to itch, yet I am too afraid to move.

“God. I love the Beatles. What’s your favorite Beatles song, Jude?” He is staring me down.

“What?” I croak. He tilts his head at me and just smiles. I can’t see, I am shaking, my hands trembling, and I realize I am still holding *The Regulators*. I set it down. I am in a hot haze. It has circled my head and clouded my vision. “Um...

*Eleanor Rigby*, I think uh... yeah, *Eleanor Rigby*.” I spit it out when I realize he is talking to me.

“*Eleanor Rigby* aye?” the way he says it sends chills down my spine, “I would’ve assumed that you were a *Yellow Submarine* girl or *Yesterday-typo-girl*.”

I shift my weight when I realize that I can no longer feel the left side of my butt, leg, and foot. Pins and needles up and down my legs and yet he doesn’t even move, he just sits and smiles.

“Um, yeah, uh I mean, no. Although I love the early songs because they are so happy, and they seem to be the most meaningful, yet *Eleanor Rigby* seems to be the complete opposite.” I stop but add, “But *Hey Jude* does happen to be up there.” He laughs and a part of me wants to think he is human.

Jonah Gilbertson. Handsome. Successful. I mean he wasn’t the most popular person alive, but people liked him. I mean, I think. He is average, five foot ten inches, straight, middle class, dark brown hair unkempt, and ruffled. He was involved. Not just a jock, but in the arts, as well. Why would he do this?

I have to say it. It is floating through my head like a thick fog just bouncing and skipping through the maze in my head. I can’t stop myself, and before I can, it’s up my throat and rolling off my tongue. “Why?”

He is still squatting, and I wonder how strong his calves must be. “You know,” he says. “This school is the bane of my existence. It’s filled with right-wing, egotistical, hypocritical, obnoxious jerks for teachers. My best friend hates me, my father left me, and my girlfriend cheated on me. However, I don’t need to tell you anything because right now I can tell, you are staring at me. All of you, all you ever do is stare at me. What’s my life worth? Huh? Why am I here? What did God put me on this earth for? For people to



stare at? Everything in my life has just been turned upside down. People hate me. People screw me. People stare at me. What did I ever do to them? Years and years I've told people about my life. I've told people about everything but yet, nothing happens." He is fuming. I have taken the road less traveled and I cannot turn back from this. "I don't need to tell you anything, you know nothing about me. Nobody asks, cares, or helps. All you ever do is stare." He spits through gritted teeth. And of all the things I could have said, I said the most cliché thing a person could say.

"It will get better, just wait and see."

Now we sit here for what feels like months, in silence.

"Well, Jude. Judey-Judey-Jude-Jude," he says in a singsongy-voice. "Well Jude, you're a good kid. Played volleyball."

He loads the gun.

"Lead in the Musical, Softball Star."

He cocks the gun with a brassy *clllliick*.

"You are friendly, and everyone likes you. You are a good kid, Jude. It's sad to see you leave so soon."

He points it at my chest.

I exhale.

"Well Hey Jude, don't make it bad. Take a sad song and make it better. Remember, to let her into your heart. Then you can start to make it better." He is singing now. And in about 5.73 seconds, I am going to be dead. Dead as a doornail. I close my eyes. I close my eyes, and I smile as I look back on all the precious memories that I have had the pleasure to have as I grew up. I don't cry. No, I don't shed one tear. I will not be another sad story. I will not be another one of the dead on television. I will not be another statistic. I. WILL. NOT.

I am standing up now, my eyes still shut. Finally seeing, seeing all the colors and lights. I open my eyes to find the

dark room we were once in is now brighter than ever before. He is standing too, looking me dead in the eyes, the barrel of his M16 rifle right in between my ribs. I look at him right back, and I smile. I look at him and smile the biggest smile I have ever smiled in my life as I see his finger go white. And... he hesitates, just long enough, long enough for me to act, for me to do something, to make a change. I move. I hold him, and the deafening crack of thunder fills the room as he pulls the trigger for the last time. All I can do is whisper, "I am sorry."

We are on the floor now. He is crying, me in his arms as he hugs me. I broke him. I can't breathe. It feels like water, water filling up my lungs. The lights are on and people are evacuating. The police are running in through the main door and the little metal door with the skinny green glass window the color of old Coke bottles, but I barely notice because I am holding him back. We are sitting on the now red carpeted floor of bookcase number nine pushing little maggot shaped squiggles into our sweaty bodies until they itch. I am holding him close; our hearts beat as one as we sit on the floor of bookcase number nine.

**Astya Black**  
**Tracy, MN**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

### **The One Who Painted with Fire**

**T**he boy by now had been watching me for several minutes. He seemed fascinated by the brush strokes my anxious mind forced onto the canvas. Through my shaking hands I tried to convey something I no longer knew the meaning of.

His wide blue eyes focused on my pale fingers as they held the tool that danced in cursive colors across the empty field of dreams and hopes I wanted to say but could not find the words to speak---

The day I met him changed my life. But looking back, I wish so many things could be erased...But I'm getting ahead of myself, back to the colors:

Golds and blues of dreamy hopes and lilac memories, reds for violent thoughts I wanted to forget!----

The day I met him was the first day I had picked up a brush in several years. I do not know what kind of nonsense I was thinking to open my paints and set up my easel in the park that day. But something spurred me to try again, to try to put aside things I could not change. And that boy, when I met him made me glad for it.

The day I met him was a warm day. I remember it clearly. A soft breeze blowing through the park and disturbing the multicolored leaves of the autumn-touched trees above my head. It was a beautiful day. If it had been a few years ago I would have been out all day painting pictures of the bony branches and velvet skies that surrounded me. Today, however, I stood. An hour passed with no paint on the canvas, another with a failed attempt at inspiration.

It was not until I took a deep breath and let it out, forcing my insecurities from my head, that I grabbed my paint tubes before I could stop myself and squeezed their contents out onto my palette and onto my brush. Forcing my mind to still as my hands in quick and urgent strokes wrote my pale dreams upon the rough, blank white of an unpainted picture. My mind gave up as my hands took over.

I am not sure when he began to watch me, and I did not notice him there for a long time. The boy stood behind me and off to the side. His wide eyes took in every movement I made. His mind seemed as lost in the colors of my frustration as my own.

My hands worked tirelessly. Even with the company of his eyes my frantic desperation continued to force the violent colors of lost things together and against each other in a chaotic war of raging reds and gentle blues. My colors stretched in rusty hues across the world I knew I could not change.

Finally I stopped, paint across my fingertips in ravaged tones like bloodied memories of dusty photos and empty beds----

I turned and gathered my things, heading away, going home. The paint on my fingertips felt like an offense. It made me feel dirty and afraid. I was reminded again in that boy's wide eyes as I looked back why I did not paint.

Home held little comfort. My things set down, I closed my eyes and tried to erase my raging mind and calm the seas of far off thought--

It was tomorrow again. I returned to the park with my easel, as if some strange, some nonsensical thought had driven me here as it had the day before....

The boy had been watching me for several minutes. He seemed fascinated by the brush strokes my anxious mind

forced onto the canvas. Through my shaking hands I tried to convey something I no longer knew the meaning of-----

I turned to him.

“Why?” My voice began, finding words among my jumbled thoughts. “What are you here for? Why are you here again? Why...do you watch me?”

The boy’s blue eyes told me before his small voice answered. “I want to learn,” he told me. “I want to make a picture.”

I stared at the boy in surprise and uncertainty. The look in the boy’s eyes reminds me of feelings I had not wanted to feel in several years. They remind me of the way another child had looked at me before, a child I might never see again. They reminded me of why I had stopped painting, of why I could no longer think without tears in my eyes!---

The colors, I told myself, think about colors and maybe it won’t hurt... I turn back to the canvas and look at the swirling mess of frustration and doubt that I put there.

“No,” I tell him. “No.” As I pack up my things in quick and urgent movements I begin to wonder, had I been speaking to the boy? Or to myself?

The next day I returned. The demon of curiosity sparked inside my soul like an unrelenting fire, kindling my need to create. When I saw the empty place in the park, however, my heart sank. The boy, who for the last few days I had almost enjoyed seeing, was not there. I decided to paint anyway.

Through windy hues and violet skies my days passed, time and memory blurring together as my paints played out a dance of love, and loss, and remembrance. The boy did not watch me for a long time.

When I saw him in the park it was fleeting. But every day I would wave in hopes he might see me, and wave back. His words dug deep into me as I thought about who I was and what I was doing.

He was sitting on the park bench when I arrived. When I approached he saw me and began to stand to walk away. "I'm sorry..." I called after him, but he did not look back. "I'm sorry that I refused." I doubt he heard my words.

When I returned home that night I decided something needed to change. The way I felt about the paints, about the colors...could I give that to someone else? I remembered the hope in the boy's eyes before my words had stopped it in its tracks, the way he had watched my movements, amazed, understanding. Tomorrow, I thought, tomorrow.

It was tomorrow again. Today I decided, was the day. Today I would lose myself in my work as I once had, in the words of a far too long silent requiem of thoughts and feelings and remembrances. I would paint them across my world and let them go. In a thousand hues my demons would fly, fluttering, finally free like a brilliant sky of brightly colored kites.

When I reached the now familiar park bench where I had spent many days, I set up my easel and pulled out my paints. I tried not to show my relief when I saw the boy once again, sitting as he often had. I went to the boy who waited there on the bench. He had by now been watching me for several minutes. He seemed fascinated in even the way I handled my brushes as I got them out. My fingers were still and precise as I offered him my hand. I would paint a memory that I knew, neither of us would soon forget. I led him to the easel.

Colors, bright and beautiful things that envelope the world in a fog of dreamy euphoria even the children cannot name....Sometimes, I wonder----

My movements were precise and determined as I squeezed paint onto the palette and then, offered him my brush. The boy stared at me with wide eyes, as if he could not believe what I was offering, as if he wanted the world to

give way beneath his movements and bow to his will in an epic sea of conquest. I smiled.

“The canvas is yours,” I whispered. “Paint it, as you will.”

**Tera Johnson**  
**Marshall, MN**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

### **Clarity: A Dream of Escape**

**O**n June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023, I stand in my room, feeling as if I'm about to make the greatest decision of my life, or the greatest mistake of my life. In front of me lies my suitcase filled with clothes, shoes, movies, books, art supplies, and all my other belongings. With every item placed in the suitcase, the burden that I've been carrying on my shoulders for years is gradually lifted off my shoulders. The escape that I've dreamt about for years is finally in action. I am finally leaving Marshall to start my own life filled with new adventures.

Better check the time; I don't want to be late for my flight. In my hand is my phone; I turn it on. The time and date shows: 9:36 AM, June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Still have about twenty minutes before I need to leave. My lock screen shows a picture of me with my high school friends. I study it for a moment with a sense of guilt slowly creeping into my body. "Won't I miss them?" I think to myself as I stuff my phone away in my pocket. I was sure that I would, because my friends meant the world to me for my whole high school career, but now I was leaving everyone behind here in Marshall. Not just my friends, but also my family, and anyone who has ever cared about me.

I zip my suitcase shut while trying to push my doubts and thoughts away. I wasn't going to let being afraid of missing the people who once played a huge role in my life get in the way of chasing the dream I've had since I was in middle school. "It's time for me to start the new chapter of my life" I tell myself, so I don't get wound up in the tornado



of self-doubt and pity I experience when I think I'm about to do something very wrong. I was so sick of being attached to unhealthy relationships; I was never going to go through that again, because I've been through that cycle enough, and I was tired of being mentally drained from it all the time. I grab my suitcase, slip on my shoes, throw some stuff into my carry-on bag, and head for the door. I step outside. Goodbye Marshall, and goodbye to my past; I will not miss either of you.

**June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023, 6:30PM, Tampa International Airport, Florida.**

Taking the first step from the tunnel leading from the airplane to the terminal gate felt as if I was reborn; a sense of newness and clearness made me feel like I had been simply taken out of my old life and set into a new one. Peacefulness washed over me like a mist of cool summer air, and I immediately knew that coming to Florida was the right choice. I wasn't going to let anyone, or anything take this sense of peace away from me; not then, and not ever. Finally, after having to live in monotonous Marshall for most of my life, I was free! While feeling brand new, I quickly walk to the baggage claim to pick up my suitcase. After I have my suitcase, I call a taxi to pick me up from the airport to drive me to my new apartment. What a great moment I was living in.

While waiting for the taxi to come, I scroll through old pictures on my phone, some very recent, while others were quite old. The pictures were mostly of fun times I spent with my friends and family. I looked at them with nostalgia, even though I had promised myself that I wouldn't get wound up in the negative thought spiral that I always seem to get stuck in whenever I missed something. I can feel the thoughts of regret rise in me as I keep looking through the pictures, but

then I see my taxi pull up, and I am forced out of my head and into reality. I get up out of my seat and walk to the cab. I put my suitcase in the trunk of the cab and hop in the backseat. I give the driver money for the ride and give him directions to my apartment in Clearwater. He pulls out into the road, and off we go. I open my bag and fish my earbuds out of the front pocket. Once plugged into my phone, I put my favorite playlist titled “car” on play. The music flows through me, like the soothing flow of a river on a crisp, cool morning. In some ways, the music makes me feel nostalgic, but also relieved. As if it were reminding me of my past, but telling me that it would be okay now, since I was in this new place, far from home. I enter a light state of sleep and imagine I am staring into the deep depths of the blue ocean of perfection. Hopeful.

“We’re here.” I am woken from my sleep, though it was only light. I put myself together and thank the taxi driver, and he wishes me a good night. Making sure I have everything, I gather my belongings, and stand still, peering at my new home, wherever it is, inside of this giant building. I walk into the apartment building and find my apartment. It’s easy, since it is on the ground floor. Once I open the door, I take my first step inside. Although small and not the nicest looking, I loved my new home! I had managed to find and buy my own place to live by myself, just days after graduation, and I was proud of myself for that! Already off to a great start.

**June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023, 9:41 PM, Clearwater, Florida**

I have just finished unpacking all my stuff from my suitcase and have settled down into my new home. Taking the bus to every place I went was not my top choice of transportation, so I went online to look for a car I could purchase. There were so many to choose from! I didn’t know

where to start, but after looking for about an hour, I found a used 2015 Civic that was well priced. I saved a screenshot of the website it was on and decided that I've had enough car searching. It was getting late, so I prepared for bed. Since I didn't have a mattress yet, I had to sleep in a sleeping bag on the floor of my bedroom. I wasn't bothered by it; I was too excited for the adventures that awaited me here in Florida to let something like that bother me. Falling asleep wasn't difficult; I was so exhausted from the traveling and the packing. I slept so soundly that night, and dreamt that I was standing by the ocean, wearing a white gown, as if I were about to enter Heaven.

**August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Clearwater, Florida, 7:14 AM**

The sun has been up for about ten minutes. It shone its bright, glowing beams of light directly into my face, where it meets my eyes. Clearly, I did not need to set an alarm every morning, because the sun has taken over the job of waking me up. I sit up and check my phone for the weather for the day. Clear skies, 102 degrees, and a slight breeze, with a humidity of 23%. What a hot day, but at least it wasn't humid outside. I thought that today would be a good day to visit the ocean, which is what I've been doing during most of my free time since I've been here in Florida. I got up, opened my closet, picked out my favorite beach outfit and swimsuit. I got dressed and ready, then found my favorite gray Adidas string bag. I've had it for years, but it was still in good shape, so why replace it? I stuffed a towel decorated with flower designs in it, along with a giant can of sunscreen. I made sure to remember to pack sunscreen this time, because thanks to my pale skin, freckles, and green eyes, I burn up like a piece of bacon in the sun without it. I grab the keys to my Civic and open the door and step into the heatwave of a typical summer day in Florida. I lock the door and walk to

my car and throw everything into the backseat. I check the trunk of the car to see if my surfboard was still there; it was. I locked the doors to my car whenever I left it, but you never know if someone could've broken into it or not. I get in, start the car and pull into the road. I couldn't wait for the adventures that this day would bring. I didn't know what they would be, but I knew that they would be amazing.

The white, fine grains of sand were already stuck in between my toes after I took my first step onto the beach. I look to the water; it was the perfect, clear, calming blue it always was when I came here, and I loved it. It reminded me of a portal to the Heavens. The further out into the water, the bigger, and fiercer the waves became. I find a good place to lay out my towel, then set my stuff down. After applying sunscreen, I walk to the shore of the beach where water meets land. I plant my feet into the water, feeling its warmth. Taking bigger steps deeper into the water, with my surfboard in my hands, I feel more and more free; free from everything from life.

Now, lying on my surfboard, I pull the water with my arms, each stroke feeling as second nature, like walking. The waves send me up, and then down as I keep paddling out further and further away from shore to find the bigger waves that wait for me. I float over a giant wave, but not big enough. Once it has passed, up ahead, I see a huge wave, looking like an aquatic mountain starting to form. Quickly, I get ready to ride it down back to shore. I pull myself up onto my board and stand up, and the wave carries me. Rising and rising higher into the air above sea level, the adrenaline kicks in, flowing through every ounce of my body. This was the biggest wave I've attempted to ride since I've started surfing and was about to be possibly my last.

I lose my balance on the board; it quickly slips out from under me. For a second, it feels like I'm floating in midair,

then down I go, falling, falling, falling. In a matter of seconds, air turns to a smack into ocean water, pushing me down. I kick and thrash my arms in an attempt to get to the surface, but the wave keeps pulling me down with it. Fighting the mighty force of the ocean was worthless, it was far too powerful. I opened my eyes and looked around in an attempt to find my surfboard, but the world around me was just a light blue and white blur. As I sink lower and lower, I give up on trying to swim to the surface, and the water is getting darker and darker. For a second, I feel hopeless, but then an epiphany washes over me like the waves far above me. What if it's okay if it won't be alright in the end? So what if my friends and family have forgotten about me? What if it's okay that my life is taken by the one thing and place where I feel the calmest and mostly as my true self? Now, my hopelessness turns into contentment, after I realize that nothing in life matters anymore, at least not to me.

The water, now a deep shade of blue, stops flowing and everything around me goes quiet. Still, I am sinking into the depths of the great ocean, until the color of the water goes black. I close my eyes and feel every point in my body go cold. My heart and lungs stop, and I feel the life inside of me depart from my body. Then, like a thin, silk blanket, tranquility wraps itself around me and circles in every direction. As it soothes me, I fall into a deep sleep, or maybe a coma. The world around me, which was once so bright and offered me many opportunities is now gone, completely, as if it slipped through my fingertips very quickly. Now, I can see objects around me starting to form, and it looks like a room, a room that I haven't set foot in for nearly ten years.

### **Summer 2013, Auburn, Maine**

The fan was humming in the corner by my bed, the sound of it creating a soothing tone to match with the sun

that shone its warm, welcoming rays through my window and onto my bed. Outside was the bright blue sky, cloudless. The tall, green grass off in the distance by the trees, swished slowly from side to side. This sight was beautiful: crisp, clear, and full of nature, but mostly because the memory in which it exists in is beautiful. The love I feel for this place is undeniably overpowering, but how could it not be when this was where the greatest, and most exhilarating times of my life took place? No one would ever understand.

The wallpaper of my bedroom walls was the same faded cream color with lines of roses that I remember waking up to see for so many mornings. My floor, hardwood and with little Lego pieces scattered all over it, was cold to the touch of my bare feet. My bedroom was small, and had a few too many things in it, but it gave off the sense of contentment; it was comfortable, and it felt at home. My TV sat on an old square-shaped coffee table in the other corner of my room. The TV was one of those box TVs from the early 2000's; surprisingly it still worked considering it must've been at least ten years old when I used it. With it I had a game console in which I would spend hours playing video games that defined my childhood. That was so long ago.

I open the door from my bedroom to the living room. My emotions seem to be spilling out of me. I see my brother sitting in the green chair, watching cartoons, and my stepmom nearby in the kitchen making breakfast. I haven't seen this sight in ten years. No words in the English language can describe this feeling I have. It's nostalgic but also the opposite, calming. I don't know. They don't see me. I wave my hands and say, "Hello, can you hear me?" but they don't turn to me. My brother continues to watch TV and my stepmom carries along with her typical daily tasks. What am I supposed to do now? Why and how am I even here?

Tears stream down my face. Standing right in the middle of the living room in front of the TV crying and screaming for my brother and stepmom's attention, they remain oblivious to me. Why can't they hear me? Don't they know I'm here? Why is this memory so painful if it is from a happy time? My crying comes to an abrupt stop. The tears dry up in an instant. I find myself walking to the front door involuntarily but voluntarily at the same time, as if I had a desire to go there but was also being forced to do this. I open the door, and I am blinded by the bright, white blur of light that shone in through the door opening. I step through, and am sent away, to a new place. This place was similar to where I was before my life was possibly taken.

### **Summer 2013, Old Orchard Beach, Maine**

This seemed odd; I was brought by my old memory to the ocean I visited so many times for so many years. But why? This place was beautiful, and I loved that I was brought here, but I don't understand why I was brought here. It looked the same as I remembered from so many years ago; cloud-free, bright blue sky dotted with flocks of seagulls, the boardwalk that stood at least one hundred feet above me with the restaurants and arcades, the ocean deep blue, and looking vast as ever. The point where the horizon and the ocean met convinced me that the ocean was infinite; They blended like a painting done by the hands of a fine artists. Maybe that's why I am here, to feel happy and soothed before I enter Heaven, because I'm dead, right? I don't even know. I think I am, but it feels like I'm dreaming, that I'm not physically here, but am at the same time. Whether I was dead or sleeping or living or who knows what, there's one thing that I do know, that I was no longer ever going to have to go through anymore pain again, not like the pain I felt on the mortal planet we call Earth.

As I did before, I enter the water and feel it swirl around my toes. I suppose, for the sake of old times, to go out further into the water and jump over the waves, like I did when I was little. The Atlantic waves crashed and crashed as I swim further and further into the ocean. The ocean seemed to have an angry feel to it; with every crashing wave, it seemed like it was letting out a scream of rage. This made me fearful, but I ignored it. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, huge dark clouds of storm circle over the ocean waters. Thunder roared through the sky and left a ringing in my ears. Where was shore? I looked and saw that the shore was nowhere to be seen. Instantly, panic flows through my body. Where was I to go? Still floating in the water, a giant wave up ahead forms and is coming for me. Not again. Isn't this how I already "died"? I prepare for impact, but right before it hits, I lose consciousness. Complete dark, complete silence, nothing around me.

*You must let go. Leave this never-ending cycle of lost memories and return to Earth.* Who is talking to me, and where am I? Apparently, a never-ending cycle of memories; sounds unbelievable, but this whole thing that has happened is unbelievable. The voice, either real or imaginary, speaks again. *The more you dwell in this place, the worse the effects are when you finally leave. Please, go home. These old times aren't worth fighting for, they are not who you are anymore.* Was I dwelling on this memory, the summer of 2013? Well, I would be lying if I said I wasn't, but now, it is time to let go. Although happy, and beautiful, this memory has caused more pain than happiness. I was done, I had made a vow to myself to never let anything hold me back ever again, and by being here, by existing in these memories for a second time, I was breaking that. There has come a time when I should've stopped letting this control my life, and that was ten years



ago, and it took me ten years for me to realize that. *Welcome back.*

**August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Clearwater, Florida, 9:09 AM**

My eyes are opened. I look, and see the sky, bright with the sun still shining. I am lying on my surfboard that I had lost. Am I alive? I think so, because I'm floating in the same ocean that I arrived at earlier this morning, and I am still breathing. It was low tide, so no big waves would be coming anytime soon. Just lying there, I basked in the sun, and let the sense of peace flow through me. After that wild experience in my "dream state," I know that now I am truly freed from everything that was holding me back. The hurt, the weight, the past, was now gone, like it was sucked out of me. Nothing was going to get in my way. The future is no longer cloudy; the fog that once glossed my vision is now gone, and all I can see ahead of me is the water, the sky, and the shore. Now, I can live, in pureness, freeness, and clarity.

When I first arrived here in Florida, I thought I was going to be able to just instantly forget everything, wipe my memory clean, but no. You can't make yourself forget the past, but you can teach yourself to get over it. For some, it's not that hard, but for others, like me, it's a challenge. It took a near death experience for me to finally let go.



**NONFICTION**  
**Grades 9 & 10**



**Kalybe Van Watermeulen**  
**Lucan, MN**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

### **I'm a Survivor**

I grew up thinking I wasn't normal because of my solitude and the many experiences I've had to deal with over the past fifteen years. I've had to deal with abuse on all spectrums, helping myself, involvement with people who had no morals, and accepting who I truly am. I was told I could never be loved and I would be nothing for as long as I lived from the people I am supposed to trust the most, and I fell into a deep depression that destroyed me at a young age. I went through Hell and have seen death, but through all of these experiences I finally realised my true value, and I saved myself.

Being a third grader was a hard job. Adding and subtracting challenged me at first, and I could never entertain the idea of negative numbers; however, the thing I expected the least in third grade was that my story was about to truly start. I was introduced to what emotional abuse was, and it pierced my heart worse than words can describe. Being nine years old and completely naive to what I was feeling, I was left hurt. I had never heard my father refer to me as a mistake, tell me to kill myself, how I shouldn't be here. My little heart was in pieces, and I was an emotional mess that started to look for the attention of anyone at any means so I could feel I mattered; I craved a parental figure. I reported this to counselors, and they of course did nothing besides warn my father, and the abuse continued.

As the abuse continued I started to hate myself and feel I could not be liked by any of my peers and that no one would

understand me. I isolated myself. Each day was me crying, wishing it would stop, and dealing with the words my father spat at me. It wasn't everything though thankfully. I had one safe haven and that was my grandmother. She took me under her wing as one of her own when I was with her, and I ended up seeing her as my guardian angel; she held my little hand and guided me. She was there for me, but it couldn't completely help the emotional abuse cycle that haunted me for years that eventually evolved in sixth grade.

By sixth grade I had grown accustomed to what I was called and owned it. I was a mistake; I didn't deserve to be here because I wasn't even supposed to exist. I was introduced to a few more challenges though: physical abuse, neglect, and independence. My father recognized my lack of response to the derogatory terms he used to attack me and escalated to physical abuse. I would occasionally be thrown around or pushed into the ground or a wall. The physical abuse didn't stop me though. The words I had been called made me numb physically and emotionally; it was nothing I couldn't handle in my twelve-year-old-mind. I was more aware and intelligent than before and went along with the abuse, slowly making it my normal routine so I wouldn't be completely bothered.

Another day in my routine and I discovered something that made some pieces click—my father's drug stash. I suddenly had a moment of realization and understood what was happening to me but not enough to help me: I was still too naive. I kept what I found a secret and moved on, but something in me had changed. I had something burning inside me; it just needed more fuel.

I kept my routine of being degraded and treated like an outcast in my family until I had my first day and night alone. I had been left alone before but never that long. I oddly wasn't alarmed. I felt more relieved because I felt free for

once. I used this time to write, draw, cook, and explore with myself, the spark inside me growing brighter. Being lost in happiness, I thought I would be alone forever, so I basked in this new freedom and ended up getting lost in an euphoric state. That was quickly shut down after my father returned. He noticed that I had drawings and had made food and used this to attack me, insulting my skill and reminding me of where my place is and where I am, but it didn't affect me too much. I had found things I could smile about and enjoy, and he couldn't stop me from doing them.

I used my new interests as an escape from the abuse and to identify my problems. I wrote quotes and journaled my feelings, I drew what I felt, and I practiced cooking to make sure I could help myself. The best thing though was my new infatuation with knowledge. I used my time in school to learn how to help myself understand drug's effect on people, my emotions, and discovered I had some real worth. I was finally starting to realise there is more to me than a mistake of a child; I was here for a reason, and even if I didn't know that reason, I would live to see the day I would know.

In the late sixth grade I was doing better. I learned how to cope better with the help of teachers, I obtained hobbies I enjoyed, and I was doing better socially, making a couple of friends. I still hated myself and felt worthless and pathetic, but I couldn't accept being labeled as that. I looked for a way to change it, and that started with my grandmother at The Motel. The Motel was my grandmother's workplace for a total of seven years. It was two stories with a main building where the boss lived and was known for the residents being druggies, pedophiles, manipulators along with the boss supporting these people with jobs and paying them in drugs; she fed their addictions. It wasn't the best environment for a standard twelve year old, but it was eye opening for me.

I saw The Motel as a place where I could relate to people like me, hurt and experienced in abuse. I had no idea what these people were actually capable of, but I treated them all special and turned into a talkative child. Druggies taught me I wasn't alone and that I should fear the path they took. I learned to avoid other people which I eventually learned were pedophiles through interactions and trusting my intuition, and the manipulators taught me to be strong through actions.

The safe haven I saw in The Motel went away later on in my years there. I was finally introduced to the horrible actions people are capable of: sexual abuse. A teenager had manipulated and tricked me. He told me he knew how to make me feel better and that he would be there as a real friend. Me being desperate and happy about this went along with him into what turned into an uncomfortable experience that I can't bring up to this day without wanting to vomit. I survived, but I went back to square one, my heart numbed, and I couldn't physically do anything. I was at my lowest possible, and it led into my first, and sadly not last, experience of self-harm.

My spark was watered down, but I couldn't give up. I had the words of all the residents of The Motel echoing in my mind. I read quotes in my journal, and that's when my spark truly lit. It burned brighter and faster than a gasoline fire, and I felt my eyes really open. I couldn't be walked on anymore, and I couldn't be abused anymore. I wanted to be happy and love myself. I made the unhealthy decision of putting my traumas behind a steel wall in my mind and focusing on myself. I was thirteen at this point and realized I couldn't waste my time hating myself. These words from other people don't define me. I needed to discover for myself who I really was, and that's when I started the chapter I am on currently.



After my little moment of realization, I had a complete change in life. I cared about my academics. I learned social skills through observing. I tended to my needs and became my own person. But it wasn't that easy in the beginning. I still had low self-esteem and cried alone with the pain of my past hurting me to the deepest depths of my core. I wasn't really happy, but it was a start. I read through my journals and dug deep into my past every day and night and forced myself to face my traumas. I knew I couldn't get to my goal with the obstacles that haunted me. I became aware. I gained an empathetic side.

I turned my traumas into learning experiences and used them to help other people. I enjoyed making people feel better, and that's when I realized I was getting closer to an explanation as to why I went through these experiences; it was to help people. I had found part of my potential, but I wasn't satisfied. I kept digging over these years and sought help. I got myself into foster care to fix my family. I sought help for my emotions and mental state. I even cut off toxic friends from my life to help myself. These new sources of salvation were intimidating at first, but they helped me realize a lot of problems I would have had trouble facing when I was older.

Therapy has helped me recognize my P.T.S.D. and Bipolar Disorder which stems from surviving my experiences. I learned I have a survivor's personality, and it's showed me that I have many great qualities to appreciate such as my artistic taste, my caring nature, my resilience, and so many other great traits. I gained self worth and feel like a human for the first time in my life. My growth is still in progress. I'm still dealing with the damage done regarding the sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, and I have so much more to learn and experience in this beautiful life. It's been rough, but I still feel that fire burning inside me. It

keeps me going when I want to give up and reminds me of my worth as a human. It helped me make it past these hard years. Through all of my pain I have endured, I don't resent anyone or any actions that have happened up to this point. Instead, I thank my experiences for making me strong and I thank this fire in me for keeping me alive to see another day.

**Kayla Ourada**  
**Hector, MN**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

### **Happiness Hides Beneath the Darkness**

**H**appiness. Happiness is just a figment of my imagination. I have never lived with true happiness. I don't even know what it feels like. I try and try to feel emotions other than anger and sadness. But, the truth is, I haven't had a reason to live happy in my entire life. Life to me is like a movie. People who look at mine never look deep enough to know the pain I feel.

When I was in 1st grade my mom left me. She ran away to try to start over. I don't know exactly why she left to start over. I was young and didn't understand. Once I found out my mom left I thought it was because of me. I never thought it was anyone else's fault except for mine. I thought I made my mom cry every time she cried. I thought I made her always yell at me. I thought I was the reason she verbally abused me. I always blamed myself.

When I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade I had a best friend. She understood me. She was the one person I ran to talk to. When it was around Christmas, her house went up in flames. She and her brother died in the fire. She died right next to the exit by suffocating from the thick smoke. When I went to her funeral I didn't cry. I couldn't show people I was weak, because I grew up not being able to cry. My mom yelled at me to stop crying whenever I did end up crying. I held back until I was home and in my room alone. The reason I didn't want people to see the weakest parts of me was because I never wanted people to know how to bully me more or have the information to stab me in the back.

After both of those events I tried to kill myself. I tied leggings around my neck so I couldn't breathe. I was not crying at all. I didn't feel any fear. I just wanted my pain to be gone. After a minute I heard my dad calling out my name. His voice stopped me from dying that day.

I moved to Hector after living in Wabasso for around six years. I was so happy I was moving. I wanted a new start and that was my chance. I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade when I enrolled in BLHS. I was super-nervous and shy. I made friends quickly though. The only thing was that the friends I made were not the safest of people.

When I turned thirteen, my friends and I got into a lot of trouble. I used to vape and drink with them all the time. They took advantage of my state of mind. I was depressed and had other mental illnesses. I started getting stalked by people off social media. They tracked me by using my location on Snapchat. I soon called the cops because I was scared. The cops tried to track the account but they deleted it before they could fully track it.

When I was ten my own brother sexually assaulted me. I held it back for three years until I told my dad. My mom knew because I told her, but I felt she didn't care. I found out my dad knew and it was like a slap across the face. He told me he thought everything was okay. I wanted to so badly say, "How can someone be okay when they are slowly dying inside?"

7<sup>th</sup> grade year. That is the grade our gym teacher assaulted the girls in my class. He made sexual advances towards some of us. He also kept looking at our chests, butts, and the front of our pants. He would make comments about our clothes like, "Those leggings fit your legs very well," and "That shirt looks very tight on you." Those words haunt me every night.

8<sup>th</sup> grade was the worst year of my life. It was the year I brought 48 to 50 pills to school almost every day. I fought the words popping in my head like popcorn in the microwave. “Just take the pills! All the pain and memories will be gone forever! Just take them and no one will miss you! No one loves you and your life is just a useless piece of trash!” Those words were the words I heard coming out of everyone’s mouths, and people didn’t even know they were saying them.

One...two...three just a few more. Four...five...six. Come on just drink them all! Seven...eight...nine! I want to stop! Why can’t I stop! TEN! ELEVEN! TWELVE! JUST KILL ME NOW! Before I knew it, I had taken all 48 to 50 pills. No tears...no anger...no pain...and NO MORE MEMORIES! I thought I was free. I hoped to die there and then. But, I didn’t. I was ready then. But I know I was not ready to say goodbye.

Why is suicide painful. I cried and cried waiting to die. I had seven hours of a bottle of pain relievers running through every cell of my body. That day was the day I cried the most. That day I realized I felt happiness before. I realized I saw my life flash in front of my eyes. When I got home I told my dad.

“Dad, I took a lot of pills,” I said.

“What do you mean? How many?” my dad asked.

“I took around 48 to 50. Dad...I am scared. I don’t want to die!” I said.

“Honey...you won’t die. Let’s go,” he told me. I can hear the hidden sadness in his voice.

I was taken to the emergency clinic in Olivia. From there I had to tell them why I took the pills. I told them I wanted to die. I was given medication to clear my system from the meds. I rode in an ambulance to the children's hospital in the cities. There I had an IV and stayed for three to four days. People always came in to talk. They had me go

to another recovery hospital. When I got there I found out my liver was on the verge of failing. If that happened I would be dead. They told me it was a close call.

I stayed at Prairie Care for two weeks. That is a mental health care program for children. I recovered and while there, it was life changing. I saw my true self come out after 14 years of hiding. I saw my family only if they set up a meeting. The whole place scared me a little bit. I didn't think I would get better, but I did. Happiness began to come out the more I talked about my feelings and past.

When I came back to school I knew I had to explain why I was gone for two weeks and didn't talk to people. I told them some of the truth. "I was in the hospital because my liver was failing," I said.

The class believed me or at least I think they did. Some kids in my class were saying they thought I was dead. I almost lost it when they said that. From that day I have never looked at death the same. I realize it hurts more than anything. It hurts the people you love and care about the most.

One thing I don't understand is why people joke about death and mental illnesses. They don't realize how real it is. I want people to see how these things hurt. Every time someone says they want to die, no one knows whether or not they really mean it. Kids die everyday by suicide, and it might have been prevented if someone actually took time to realize the pain behind their fake smile.

To me depression is something that attacks you. It'll never stop, even if you have meds. I feel it rot all the happy memories from my mind. It tells me that life is all pain. It is one of the most painful things I live with to this day. Every story I hear about depression, the victim slowly loses control of their own mind, and soon they give up and just hand it to depression in defeat.

I still live with depression today. I also have anxiety, anger issues, PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), and sleeping problems. If I am honest about my 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, it is the best and the worst year of my life. I lost so much but I gained my sanity and humanity back. I am one of the few people who can say I survived. I survived depression's grasp around me. The only thing I hate is that I can never say I lost depression forever. Depression will always be a part of me. No one is ever free once they have it.

My story is only one of the few that can be shared. I feel sad every time I remember I was a victim and survived. I can't imagine what their family is going through. I just know I was not getting accepted into recovery hospitals and it hurt me knowing someone took my chance of getting better. I almost was transferred out of state until someone got better and gave me their place. They don't know how much they helped me. I want to thank the person who got better before me. I say this because without them getting better, I might not be here to this day.

I know there are other people out there who didn't get help and died. I want to help people realize that mental illness is a real thing happening. It is happening so often now that it is a problem. I want to inspire people to give and get help when they read my story. People need help, and if no one is going to help, then I just have to start it and help them myself.

They need to know there is a bright, warm sun past the dark cold clouds that linger in the sky. Let's give them hope to live and fight for their life. Everyone needs strength to show people there are more problems underneath the iceberg's peeking head. All you need to do is strive and tell someone close to you. Let people know there is a whole lot more of you under the water than they think. Don't be afraid to say these three words: "I need help."

**Alec Langerud**  
**Worthington, MN**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

### **Rice is Nice**

**W**hen I hear the words “traditional food” I instantly think of my mom’s sweet rice pudding. The creaminess, sweetness, chunky consistency, and stomach-filling substance all contribute to how my brain portrays rice pudding as traditional food. Whenever she tells me she’s going to make it, I always get excited. And guess what? She *always* makes way more than one serving’s worth and, yep, you guessed it, we have leftovers. Cha-Ching! I seriously recommend rice pudding to everyone. It will definitely satisfy the sweet tooth you may have, but it won’t leave you feeling sick from the sweetness. This traditional Norwegian dessert is very easily my favorite dessert of all time.

A Scandinavian Smorgasbord is held every year at my church—American Lutheran Church—and I always look forward to it. (Especially now that I don’t have to work during it for confirmation!) The traditional foods from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland are all served together in one big meal that everyone gets a full belly from. There’s mashed potatoes and gravy, meatballs, pickled herring, turkey, fruit salad, rosettes, Lefse, Krumkake, and let’s not forget the best part—Rice Pudding; these are some of the main foods at the smorgasbord. I first heard about my new favorite dessert at the first one I worked at (as a helper). Everyone got a break to go eat with their families, so when my family arrived, I got to enjoy the wide variety of tasty foods and tried Rice Pudding for the first time. Don’t get me wrong, the other foods and desserts will fill anyone’s



stomach with happiness, but the rice pudding that my mom makes has a special place in my heart.

“Wow, that’s delicious! It’s like a thousand rainbows dancing on my tongue!” is what I’m sure I said when I tasted Rice Pudding for the first time. Seriously though, I did say something (not as dramatic) along those lines. I genuinely enjoyed the texture and the way it tasted—a little chunky (because of the rice), creamy, and of course, sweet. My mom just made Rice Pudding for no reason once and I got so happy that I offered to do the dishes. I *offered* to do the dishes—no kid does that—because I was so excited. Who knew that a simple dessert could make me so happy that I did something way out of the ordinary; and I still remember, scene for scene, how it all happened. If someone’s looking for a new and exciting dessert to try, my mother’s Scandinavian Rice Pudding is definitely the way to go.

#### Scandinavian Rice Pudding Recipe:

- 4 cups water
  - 1 tsp. salt
  - 2 cups raw white rice
  - 1 cup cream
  - 2 quarts whole milk
  - 1 ¼ cups sugar
1. Bring water and salt to a boil. Stir in rice. Continue stirring until rice/water boils. Cover and reduce heat to a simmer. Simmer 14 minutes, or until all the water is absorbed.
  2. In a separate pan, heat cream and milk. Add warmed cream and milk to the rice mixture when water is absorbed. Add sugar and stir. Simmer

until rice is of a pudding like consistency. Stir at times to avoid scorching. The simmering will take about an hour and possibly longer. Avoid scorching!

3. The large amounts of liquid are correct. It will be absorbed if cooked long enough.

**POETRY**  
**Grades 11 & 12**



**Melissa Snyder**  
**Porter, MN**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

### **The Universe**

*Bang!*

That was it.

That's what they say happened

Air and water and life;

Stretching,

Expanding inside of an unforeseeable space.

Void.

Systems and stars and dust

Everywhere.

Everything

Calm, yet destructive

One push and that dust is hard and big and wide and dark and...

It's hurtling forward!

Life is unaware.

Soundless

*Boom!*

Start again.

That is the beauty of it,

This time there are

Eyes that see and

Wonder.

Eyes that *want*.

Want more than what home has to offer.

Air and water and life and systems and stars and dust

and love and hate and lies and truth and desire and strength.

Looking up,

Finding that they want to know

How and why and when and where.

*Where does that leave us?*

They knew about the void;

A *void* that they so desperately wanted to explore.

Not *if*,

When.

Answers.

Answers to questions that are much simpler

All leading up to leaving,

Because one day

It will start again.

New life will begin.

But who will see the beauty in that?

**Nicole Senese**  
**Morton, MN**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

### **The Shepherd's Companion**

I, me, and my  
That's who I am  
I, me, and my  
A soft little lamb

I have a coat made of wool  
And beady, black eyes  
My owner loves me a lot  
Tells me I remind him of a beautiful sunrise

"Sunrise?" I ask he  
For there is no red or orange on my coat, not that I can see!  
"Silly lamb," he replied  
Silence followed as he looked toward the countryside

The wind blew his hair  
And he shut his eyes  
He pressed his hand against his chest  
"You make me feel warm inside."

Ours, us, and we  
That's who we are  
Ours, us, and we  
As happy as can be

**Nicole Senese**  
**Morton, MN**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

**Bad Habits**

Just because I didn't kill someone doesn't mean I'm a good person  
I think that's why they left me  
I'm a blight that, over time, can only worsen  
Just because I didn't kill someone doesn't mean I'm a good person  
So many bruises placed upon their skin  
Prided on sobriety; well, used to be  
Just because I didn't kill someone doesn't mean I'm a good person  
I think that's why they left me



**FICTION**  
**Grades 11 & 12**



**Melissa Snyder**  
**Porter, MN**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

**1988**

**M**urder, in the traditional sense, is when one person takes another's life. There are so many different kinds that hold so many possibilities. There is the planned murder, the spur of the moment murder, an accidental murder, but they are all still murders.

I was murdered in 1988. That year, the biggest movies were *Rain Man*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, and *Coming to America*. I only saw one of them. The price for a postage stamp was twenty-five cents. I mailed three envelopes. The Lakers won the NBA Championship and the Redskins won the Superbowl. I watched one half of the basketball game. I was a week from turning sixteen.

When I look back, my life was filled with nothing but trivial, meaningless events that piled up to make me *me*. Things I took for granted, like riding my bike on a sunny day, writing notes that I would never send to my secret crush, and singing "Every Rose Has Its Thorn" at the top of my lungs. I miss those things.

I lived in a small house in a medium-sized town full of inconsequential people who did boring and mundane things. The kind of mundane things that don't classify as *murder*. Nobody locked their doors, people didn't use guns for anything but hunting, and parents let their kids walk home from school without a worry.

I was murdered on a Tuesday. A *Tuesday!* Normal. I was walking home from school since my bike's tire was flat, and my dad couldn't get it fixed until Friday. I was actually hoping for a brand new bike for my birthday. I only lived

five blocks from the school and it was a nice day, so I wasn't really unhappy about walking.

Since it was such a normal occurrence, I don't remember much. Like, I can't remember what the lady with all the cats looked like or if Mr. Davenport's house was grey or blue. The only thing I remember about *before* is that whenever I took a step, my backpack would slam against my back and the things inside made little irritating noises. I recall feeling angry about it.

And then everything went black.

What is murder? Murder is when one person takes another's life with no more thought than picking lint off of one's shirt. Murder is a cold, calculated occurrence, yet so uncomfortably itchy that no matter how much one commits it, one never truly stops the itching. People talk about murder like it's evil, but what is really evil is never actually thinking about the dead the way they should be.

I never really thought about what happens to you when you die. Let me tell you, it's not what anybody expects. I hadn't ever really thought about death until I saw my own body. At first, I didn't even recognize myself. Dead eyes, pale, bruised skin, an unmoving body. I think we all get used to watching how someone moves and when you see a dead person, you can tell they aren't normal. After the confusion wore off, I realized that *that* was my face, my body, my eyes.

I tried to scream. Nothing happened. I couldn't move my mouth, in fact, I couldn't even feel my mouth. Unbridled panic is the only thing I felt. Then I asked myself how am I looking at myself if I really am dead? I look down and there is nothing. I should see *something*, but I don't. There is only an empty space.

This is what we are when we are dead. This is what we become. An invisible soul that makes no sound, has no physical body, and can only acknowledge sight and emotion.

This is what I am. I am gone. My body—an empty husk. My panic is still there, churning in what is left of me. I scramble to remember something—anything.

The year was 1988. I saw *Coming to America* last weekend. I wrote three letters. The half time score of the Championship was 52-47. I was supposed to turn sixteen. But I never would.

**Rose Hanson  
Marshall, MN  
2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

### **Hamburger Lady**

This woman, no one can remember her name, owned a restaurant that would make the most delicious hamburgers. They were juicy, served on a crispy bun, and best of all, covered in her sweet sauce. She was kind but had no head for business, and one day I passed her restaurant window, but didn't see my reflection. A gigantic red closed sign covered it like dirt covers a grave.

I saw her number in small print by the bottom right corner of the sign. I whipped out my phone and gave her a ring. "Excuse me, errr... ma'am, but I saw the sign and wanted to say I'm sorry. Your hamburgers were simply the best."

She replied, "Thank you, you don't know how much that means to me. Say, do you want one? I may not have my restaurant anymore, but I still have my kitchen."

I went to her house and she served me a delectable burger. She didn't talk much, but simply watched me eat it. I think it was her last hurrah, like earning the first dollar, but now she was losing it.

"Thank you, and thanks for the hamburger," I said, as I turned to leave.

Suddenly, the door burst open.

"Who is she?"

I had made an acquaintance with a beautiful girl when I worked at the Pencil's Companion. She liked me and before I knew it, we were dating. Her father was the CEO of the writing company, and I didn't want to ruffle anyone's feathers, so I went along with it. I figured that with the end

of my job, she would forget me. Why wouldn't she? A former employee had just quit her father's company. I was nothing special, there was bound to be another writer she would find just as cute. So, why had she now just burst into this apartment?

Emmaline's nose was flaring, and the sweet green of her eyes had disappeared. It was replaced with a more envious hue. I didn't think she was the jealous type, but I was wrong. "Emmaline, this woman simply wanted to make me one of her hamburgers. Did you know you can't find them anywhere else? Of course, you can get a regular hamburger, but it's not the same," I said, rushing to her.

"Hello, Emmaline. Do you want one, too?" The woman smiled.

Emmaline wasn't convinced, so I took her into the hall to try to calm her.

"Darling, I would never cheat on you... You do know that I quit and am moving right?" I said.

"Well, of course. You won't get far working under my dad's big thumb. I think it is a brilliant idea," she said.

"Well... I assume you'll be staying here. I couldn't ask you to come with me. Who knows what my fortunes will be? Your father will take care of you," I said imploring, straining to see what was going on in her eyes.

"Of course, I am coming with you. It is no sacrifice to me, and I care about you too much to let you leave without me. Let's get coffee and think about our new lives." She started to drag me away as I stopped her.

"Emmaline, I must be honest with you. I like you, but I can't, I mean, won't be with you. You'll be a wonderful girl for someone else..." I stumbled through the words. I had never broken up with someone before. "...and well, we just wouldn't work out."

She was red. She was trying to determine how to respond. She had obviously never had someone break up with her. Finally, she was determined. Her face straightened, but as she whispered, her words sounded more like a threat than a request. “Is it because of her? I could learn to make hamburgers or pizza or whatever it is you want. Don’t you want that?”

I was horrified. I couldn’t deal with confrontation. I told her we would talk tomorrow as I hastened to get out of the building and into a taxi. I would write her a letter, tonight, telling her the truth. She would get over it, right? But, just in case, I would board the train tonight and send the letter at the next depot. How terrifying.

I was finally home. I had my degree and was ready to start afresh. I left Emmaline with no clue as to where I went, and she had soon gotten over me. I read about her marriage to millionaire George Williams in the paper. So, that was why she was desperate to leave with me. She was running away, too.

Years later, I look back to that fateful night where I broke up with Emmaline. I had wondered if I should get a job in that city and not come back here. I was frightened. I had left some things unsettled. But that night taught me that I couldn’t be the coward I was. I had to face things. That night was the start of my life. As I look around me, I can’t help but thank Hamburger Lady.



Alexis Starnes  
Storden, MN  
3<sup>rd</sup> Place

### Broken

He is a guy. A guy who has a good and charming personality. Everyone at school wants to get to know him, and he always has a smile on his face. A smile so pure and kind, but his eyes—they hide something—but only for a second. Then they also click into pure perfection. People joke with him about how he never wants to have a girlfriend, and he just goes with it, because they don't know that he is like me.

I am an orphan. Although they don't call us that anymore; that's what we call ourselves in our heads. My mom died when I was four. She hung herself. My dad followed two years later but with a bullet to the brain. Such has been my life. From then on I went from foster home to foster home. Some were better than others, but it seemed like the best homes were those I stayed at for the shortest amount of time. The worst ones seemed to drag on forever.

One I stayed at for four years, from age seven to eleven years old. The people there didn't like kids, but they wanted the cash that they received for fostering orphans, so they tied me and two other kids up in a small room, and left us there for days at a time. If we got loud or made them mad, we would be put in even smaller closets. I still have the scars on my wrists and ankles as a reminder of how this world is cruel and, in a strange way, oddly forgiving. I probably should've died in that foster house, but I didn't. Somehow I survived, and to me, that means that I still have a purpose; something important to do.

I was thirteen when I came to this school and I met him. He was perfect in his imperfect ways back then... just like he is now. Not even I knew his secret back then.

I was taking out the trash one night when I saw a person limping down the street. It was him. When I asked him what happened, he tried to smile with a swollen cheek and said “nothing.” But even in the darkness all around, you could see where a black eye was forming and where he had tried to wipe away a bloody nose. That was the night I learned that even the friendliest people have their secrets, and that they are broken, too, and maybe even a little worse.

He was the result of a fun time gone wrong. Can you believe it? Someone so imperfectly perfect wasn't supposed to happen. His father married his mother when his father was 19 and his mother was 17, because they were expecting him.

For the first few years everything was perfect. Then his father started to drink. When he drank, he became an evil person. It started with mild abuse toward his mother that he was too young to understand or stop. It got worse as the years went on. One day, when he was 12, he stood up to his father, and that landed him in the hospital for four days.

That was the day that he opened up to me, and I did the same. That was the day he learned that I was quiet and very reserved. Even though we had different scars, we could relate to our separate pains. We became good friends, realizing that we both had secrets. He would come over to whatever house the foster system put me in and would come to me for comfort when his father drank, after he knew his mother was safe.

Even in a crisis, his actions were pure. The most heart-wrenching story he ever told me was how he was terrified to love anyone because his grandfather, who said that he dearly loved his grandmother, was abusive to her. He believed that if promising that abuse wouldn't happen, it was a guarantee

that it most certainly would. He believed it would be safer to not love anyone like that at all. So, no girlfriend. Not now. Not ever. He said that he could not bear to know that he might absentmindedly hurt someone he loved to the point of not even recognizing them at some points. He was afraid to love because of something he was afraid of becoming.

He was the guy so kind and caring to everyone. The guy, willing to help anyone with anything. The guy, absolutely gorgeous and kind. He is, he is . . . . He was.

Now, here I am standing in a church looking at him in a coffin. They did a good job covering up the blow that killed him. His father is locked up for killing his own son. His father struck him across the head with a three-fourths full bottle of vodka. His father showed no remorse that his son spent two agonizing days of pain in the hospital until he finally passed away weak and wishing he had more time. More time to tell people what he actually thought, what was happening, and who he really cared for. I was with him in his final days. He was the only person I could trust, so I was there.

It was there, on his deathbed where he told me that he loved me, and that was more than I could bear. This perfect guy that everyone loved, slowly but quickly becoming only a cold shell of who he was. It was also there, where I began to believe that it was my fault. I loved him, too, but knowing how he wanted everyone to be safe from his untapped secret side, I never told him my feelings, but somehow, he ended up like my parents. It must be my fault.

Everyone now knows what his life was really like and some know the truth about how his abrupt death happened. Even in this, his mother is still in denial. She claims that he fell and hit his head while running. A freak, tragic accident, but she and I know what actually happened whether she would admit it or not. She is broken beyond repair, and no

one, even at her own son's funeral, will give her anything other than an apology over something she couldn't control.

I know she wanted out of that house—away from her husband—but there is no way that she would've wanted to leave if she knew she would lose everything she ever loved by getting her wish. She wouldn't have screamed that night when her husband was drunk. She would've just taken another beating, another broken nose or cracked rib if she knew that getting the attention of her kind and caring son would've gotten him killed. She knows that I was behind their house that night because he wanted to go for a walk after his dad went to sleep. I saw the entire thing. From the bottle, to his body falling, to his mother screaming as she ran outside. She saw me and gave me a look that said "call an ambulance." I know her pain, losing everyone she ever loved or cared for, but she needed someone, and so did I.

So every day we take steps together to grow and mourn. With every step we take it feels like we're healing our broken selves. With every step, it's like we're taking a brick and putting it back on the wall where it once belonged. It will never be as perfect, but it is a start...the beginning of healing.

I never thought that I would care for someone until I met him. The imperfectly perfect guy that could've been great at anything he wanted to do... if his life hadn't been cut short. The guy with the personality of an angel and a smile so warm and inviting. The guy with eyes that held secrets but only for a second. The guy I would have never known if I hadn't been broken, too.

He got his final wish for his mother and me, though. Both of us found some comfort and a way to heal our broken selves. We miss him dearly, but with every day he's also with us. From our kind deeds to the times we could swear we hear his voice in the wind. We know he is with us in our hearts and memories. We know that we can become unbroken.

**NONFICTION**  
**Grades 11 & 12**



**Summer Janzen**  
**Jackson, MN**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

### **The Heart of Competing**

Looking up, I see the sky. It is an endless sea of blue today, and I have to squint to see the green grass that covers the rolling slopes of the course. To go along with the bright sunlight, there is cool air that nips at the spectators and strengthens the running competitors. Today is a big day for the cross country runners who have spent months training to get into this exciting meet. Cross country may not be the most popular sport among spectators, but many of the dedicated athletes wouldn't trade their spot as a runner for the world. I know that I wouldn't.

Standing anxiously at the starting line, I can see color-coated competitors milling around their team camps like bees buzzing around a hive, and others lining up at the starting line. The man who is starting the race holds a gun by his side and wears a bright orange sleeve. He talks with a few of the athletes who aren't too nervous to listen. "I once coached a cross country team," he tells me and four other girls, "but I am a bit too old for that now. Instead, they named the meet after me and gave me the great honor of starting off the races."

All too soon, there is the ear-piercing crack of the gun. The sound is closely followed by the pounding of the competitor's feet on the course. I notice how the falling leaves stick to the spikes on the bottom of each athlete's shoes. There is a toddler who frees himself from his mother's arms and runs after the herd of competitors with excitement.

The big race has begun. A fellow athlete feels the need to chat during the three-mile race, but she only receives huffs

and puffs of breath as her reply. Eventually, the tight pack of runners slowly begins to spread out. Coaches yell at the athletes, telling them to pick up the pace, move up in the pack, and to pass five girls before the first-mile marker.

The one-mile sign is spray-painted on the grass in white. A few rebellious blades still show green and make the “1” look lopsided. The athletes around me glance down as they trample over it. When their gaze rises again, their eyes are set on a monster hill; it’s at least fifty meters long. Some of the runners approach the hill and meet it with confidence. They lift their knees high and charge up its grassy slope, and I try to pump my arms and keep my legs moving strong. Then there are other athletes who groan inside when they find that the hill has come to them. These runners barely lift their legs and shuffle up the hill slowly. Their heads are down; they are tired and discouraged.

At the two-mile mark, I see my own coach. He hollers at me like other coaches do to their athletes. “Summer!” He yells my name sharply, and there is more fire in his eyes than in mine, “Catch that girl from Murray County before the next turn! We need you to stay in the top third of this race!” I dig deep and fight for a better position. Beginning to increase my speed, I lengthen my stride a tad and pass a girl in red, then one in green. About four yards in front of me is the girl from Murray County.

The girl from Murray County has her curly blond hair pulled up in a high ponytail and she wears a purple headband to match her uniform. I come up beside her, and then pass her just as the course takes a left around a towering evergreen. Four hundred meters is spray painted in white on top of its many fallen pine cones. Four hundred meters—the final stretch. In the distance, I can see strings of multicolored flags marking the finish line. They wave to me cheerfully and I long to meet them. Every runner’s legs move faster,



and hearts beat harder as the athletes push themselves to their physical limits and closer to those welcoming flags. I see a curly blond ponytail move in front of me, and I try to muster up more energy—more speed. The wind whips my hair away from my face and I break free from the exhaustion in the last hundred meters, again passing the purple uniform and two other girls on my way into the finish.

Trying to catch my breath, I look over my shoulder and see the Murray County girl's blond ponytail bobbing past the colorful flags. She raises her arms above her head in exhaustion and smiles at me, even though I beat her. Spectators continue to yell and cheer as many more athletes pile in behind us. One girl in a red uniform shouts to a woman in the crowd that she needs her inhaler as she crosses the finish line and faints.

After moving out of the finishing chute, I see the blond girl from Murray County moving towards her team's camp. I jog over to her and she smiles. "Good race today," I tell her as I continue to catch my breath.

"Thanks," she chuckles, "I don't have much of a kick at the end of the three miles, but I love this sport. I love blowing past the finish line at the end of a race."

"Yeah, I think that's a special feeling that only the runners share. Most of the spectators just don't get it. It kind of connects all of us athletes."

"Yes!" She exclaims, "I feel the same way, and I wouldn't want to leave that connection for the world."

I smile as I walk back to camp. The conversation with the girl from Murray County is still fresh in my mind, and I think about what she said. It's true: cross country might not be the most popular sport among spectators, but the athletes cherish it. I must agree with my competitor in purple: I wouldn't leave this sport for the world.

**Taylor Ponto**  
**Worthington, MN**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

### **What It Is**

I remember sitting in the hospital waiting room with my back in terrible pain, and not even being able to bend the slightest bit forward without my eyes tearing up. It was like a thousand little darts were being thrown into my back like it was a dartboard. But you were there, checking on me and making sure I was okay like any other loving, caring mother would. I remember you comforting me after I found out I wasn't able to play basketball or show at my favorite cattle show because of the fracture in my back. I remember the car ride there and back; you tried your hardest to avoid bumps on the road, even though we both knew it was nearly impossible to do because you knew how much pain I was in and how those small bumps could bring your little girl to tears. That's what makes all this crazy. How someone who cared so much when I was in so much pain, put me in a situation that seems to be more painful. The only difference being that this time it's a mental pain.

I always get asked if I'm okay, but the truth is: I don't know if I am. I'm not sad, but I'm not exactly happy. I'm hurt. You always ask me what's wrong. Or if I'm okay. You ask why I'm mad at you and what you can do to fix it. Well, I don't know how you can fix it. What happened, happened, and it's just going to take time. I'm not going to instantly be okay, especially with everything happening—how things used to be, how you left, and how things are different now. My life has been completely changed.

I can't precisely explain how frustrated I am that you hurt Dad. It's a mixture of anger yet also a slight bit of

disappointment. He's such a sweet, caring, and loving guy; he really doesn't deserve to get hurt the way you hurt him by getting cheated on. It wasn't even for a better guy. It was for a guy who makes a living off of cleaning dishes and making pizzas. You left Dad for a guy who's own son doesn't like him and who does drugs and drinks a lot. Then Dad tried to fix things after he found out, and you kept cheating. Instead of trying, you just gave up. Then you left, and now it seems like you just parent when you want to. You only do things that benefit you or the things you want to do.

I get you got married at a fairly young age, and you may have missed out on your twenties. Then you had a baby, and then a couple more, but I'm acting like a mom of a thirteen-year-old, and I'm only sixteen. I have to help cook and clean, and I work, I go get groceries, I drive Bailey (my little sister) around all the time. I do most of this with my own money, my money from my minimum wage job, because I don't want to use Dad's money that he has to use for bills and other things to help us live in the house.

I am always struggling to keep myself awake in class, and meetings, because aside from cleaning and cooking and making time for Bailey so she doesn't feel alone during all this, I still have to go to work for money. I still have pages and pages of homework for school. I still have meetings and activities with 4-H and help with the church. My head is pounding like a drum. I'm in physical and mental pain. I'm overwhelmed. I'm drowning by keeping everyone else floating. But the thing with that is that they're not even completely floating; they're still swallowing mouthfuls of water. So I'm not even completely succeeding with that. I promise them I'll never let go, but in the end, it feels like I broke that promise and let them slowly drown.

I know we never saw eye to eye on things. You never liked me showing cattle; I mean for goodness sakes you made me sit outside and eat my supper because “I smelt like cows.” I couldn’t even sit on the couch after the farm because “it would make the couch stinky.” Yet no one else really had a problem with it until you started getting mad about it. Then you would get mad that I didn’t eat supper, but why would I? If I had to eat outside, or down in the old, cold, musty basement, do you really blame me that “I was never with the family” or “I was always in my room”? Maybe that was because you made me feel horrible when I was there. You would jump onto any opportunity there was to make me feel bad about something or to make me feel like I was weird.

According to you, I over-exaggerated everything. How this year, if I complained about any friend problems in school, or if I was getting made fun of again, you didn’t want to hear it. Because you told me to take college classes so I wouldn’t have to deal with it, yet I didn’t, and I took normal high school classes. You had to make me feel like I was wrong, and I did something dumb. When you’re right, you always seem to have to rub it in and make me (and a lot of us) feel like idiots.

“You’re never wrong.” “It’s our fault.” “It’s Dad’s fault you cheated.” Really? He worked his butt off to try and fix things, and you just walked out on him. You kept cheating. You kept going to see Brent. You are living with Brent. But even before all of this, when something would go wrong, it would be everyone else’s fault. Laundry wouldn’t be done, while you were one of the only people home that whole day, watching TV. Once Dad or I would get home, you’d tell us to leave you alone and get laundry done or get dishes done. If you asked how our day was, you always tuned out our response. Or ask us something then

get mad because “we were talking over your show.”

I’d tell you how sad I was after you asked what was wrong. I’d finally open up to you. And you would start telling me how your problems are worse. How your life is worse. How when you were a kid, your mom wasn’t as understanding, and you had bigger things to worry about. You would make me feel like I didn’t matter, like my problems didn’t matter. Like this depression I had wasn’t real depression; it was just me over exaggerating. You made me feel like a grain of salt. But I could never tell you that. I’ve always been way too scared of you to tell you exactly how you make me feel. How half the time I cry, it’s because of something you’re involved with. Or because of how you made me feel.

But I forgot that you like to act like you are still in high school. You’re the one who started the rumor that Cody and I were more than we ever were during fall ball. The reason we rushed into a relationship-type of thing was because everyone already assumed so, and that was because you made them think that. And since we rushed into it, bad things happened, a bad thing that could’ve possibly turned out good, because my own mother started a rumor about how he and I went on dates and kissed all the time when that never even happened. We were just friends, that is all we ever were.

You wonder why I would never tell you about boys. Maybe it was because I was afraid this would happen again. That I’d get something good, and you’d do this again. Or you would go to all your teacher friends and try to dig up all the baggage about their family. You would always have something bad to say about any guy I told you about. You hated Jaden for the longest time and didn’t accept it that I liked him until you found out Syd approved. And “Cody was just going to use me” because he was a

senior and I was a freshman. Yeah, because God forbid, a guy actually wants me for me.

I just told you about Austin, and you asked questions. Where's he from? How did you guys meet? Does your dad know him? When I answered, you barely seemed to care. Then I told you I was going to hang out with him the next day. "Is he picking you up?" "Make sure he comes up to the door." "Where are you guys going?" Asking millions of questions that, in all honesty, I didn't care to respond to. A couple of weeks later, you asked if I was still talking to Austin. When I told you I was, you saw the smile on my face. You saw it light up, the way someone's face lights up only when they're talking about someone they really, really care for. Later, I saw that same look on your face when you started talking about Brent.

Did you know I can't bring myself to go to the Casey's you used to work at? I drive by it and just think, that's where you met him. That's where it all started. Then I wonder what happened when you had to close? Was he there? How many times were you two alone there? Those late nights when you said you had to close, did you really have to close? Or did you go to his house? Did you two stand outside and have your smoke break together? What kind of conversations happened there? When did things change?

I would always walk in there with Dad, just to see you and talk to you, while Brent was in the back, making pizzas. How could he do that? See your family, walking in to see you, having conversations with you, hearing your husband say, "I love you," and still be able to bring you back to his place, hold you, kiss you, . . . be with you. Then, there's Ground Round, one of the very few sit-down restaurants in Worthington, that I can no longer go eat at. I don't want to go there. You two switched from Casey's to

Ground Round together. I don't want you to wait on me, knowing he's in the back. I'd be sitting in the booth, my heart dropping as every person walked out of the kitchen. My mind would be giving them all that same scrunched up face reserved for Brent. They would all, at first, look tall and skinny, and have that bald spot on the top of their head. It'd be for a split second, and my heart would drop then slowly come back to ease once I realized it wasn't him. I'd be sitting there thinking about how when you're done here, you're leaving with him. I don't want to eat off of those plates, drink out of those cups, use that silverware, knowing that he touched them wondering how those dirty hands of his that helped make such a mess could clean these dishes so well.

You want us girls to be okay with all this, and like your new boy. But why should we?

How do you like someone who played a big part of in your family splitting up? How do you like someone who—although he knew a person had a family, a husband who loved her, three girls who loved her and looked up to her—still slept with this person? How do you expect us to be okay?

**Bain B. Souwankham**  
**Worthington, MN**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

### **Broth and Bond**

**W**et rice strands—sounds like something someone would slap you with, doesn't it? "Wet rice strands" happens to be the direct translation of Khao Piak Sen (a Laotian soup-based dish). These wet rice strands have been something I've enjoyed eating ever since I came out of the womb (I was probably eating them in the womb, too). My mom doesn't make them often, but when she does, my heart starts beating as if I've just finished six cans of Red Bull. However, it's more than an Asian chicken noodle soup. To me, it represents something—family.

The delicate—but springy—rice noodles and hearty chicken broth are connected to many memories of my family (immediate and extended). My mom is the only one in my immediate family that knows how to make the dish, so this dish will always feel like her warm embrace. But this dish is more than just my loving mom, it's all of my grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, and nieces back in Laos (my family tree would be like the giant sequoia of family trees). I've only visited them three or four times, yet my memories of them are some of my most cherished memories. Each time I go back to my second home, the family throws a festival to commemorate the memories of the ones we've lost. One of the dishes usually served during these festivals is my favorite wet rice strands, Khao Piak Sen.

Many memories relate to my humble Asian Chicken Noodle soup, but there is only one memory that warms my heart as much as Khao Piak Sen warms my stomach. In my most recent trip to Laos (which was last summer), a big part



of my family decided to hire a tour bus to tour the more southern part of the country. The trip lasted a week, but it's one week I'll always be happy to think about.

The trip first started with seven to eight-hour car rides from our town of Sayaboury back to the capital, Vientiane. With a convoy of about four or five trucks and one SUV, we made the trip through the mountains to the capital where we stayed the night. With a party of about 40 of us, we all hopped on the charter bus before the sun had even come up. The first three hours were uneventful as we all were still tired from waking up too early, but our first stop was a gas station as people needed the restroom.

A couple of my uncles decided to get beer at the gas station while we were there (a genius idea). Cans of beer were passed around, and if you've ever drunk it before, then you know that drinking alcohol fills the bladder faster than a fat kid stuffing his face at an all-you-can-eat-buffet. That first day, we stopped at a gas station every 30 to 45 minutes. That same day, the family discovered that the bus had karaoke, and (with liquid courage in their systems) a sudden bout of karaoke ensues. One of my uncles was the first one up, and as a little league baseball player, his pitch isn't even close to the mark. The rest of the family is laughing and throwing jokes at him, but he keeps singing to his heart's content. However, many of the people that were laughing were not much better than that uncle of mine. However, not everybody was bad; in fact, a couple of my aunts had angelic voices. But on that day, I found out half my family is tone-deaf, and my headphones aren't very good at noise isolation.

After we were done stopping at gas stations every 30 minutes, we stopped for food in small towns that were built around those main roads like how towns were built around railroads in Industrial America. These towns usually had multiple "Mom and Pop" restaurants that served a variety of

foods, yet with all the variety, my favorite bowl of noodles was always an option. I must've had Khao Piak Sen at least once a day, and each bowl was tastier than the last one. At first, I chalked it up to different cooks, but as I listened to my uncle's booming voice and the resulting chorus of laughter, I realized it wasn't the cooks—it was the company. The delicate noodles couldn't compare to the strength of my family's bond, and the warmth of the broth couldn't hold a candle to the warmth my family radiated. I became closer to my family than ever before on that trip. I now realize that nothing could ever replace the bond of a loving family.

**The History of the Annual Creative Writing Contest  
sponsored by Southwest Minnesota State University  
& Southwest West Central Service Cooperative**

The Creative Writing Program at Southwest Minnesota State University, working in partnership with Southwest West Central Service Cooperative, designed and conducted the first annual Creative Writing Contest in the spring of 2005.

The contest was subtitled *Giving Voice to the Youth of Southwest and West Central Minnesota* and was established to encourage a love of language and writing among the region's young people. We wanted to recognize gifted young writers in this area of Minnesota. That first annual contest unearthed a wealth of talent and demonstrated the desire of our young people to tell their stories and express their imaginations through writing. The endeavor was so successful that SMSU and SWWC Service Cooperative have continued the contest on an annual basis. We are proud to note that the Creating Spaces Writing Contest is now in its 16<sup>th</sup> year as a collaborative, outreach effort that supports young writers in our region.

The contest is open to all students in grades 3-12 attending public, private or home schools within the 18-county area of southwest and west central Minnesota. Students may enter the contest through a classroom assignment or on their own. The categories for submission are Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry. Students are allowed to enter in more than one category.

Once submitted, the student's written work is first screened by SMSU creative writing students. Each submission is read by multiple student judges. The finalists are then submitted to the final judges, faculty in the SMSU English Program.

Prizes are awarded for the top three winners in each category and grade group. The most coveted prize for the contest is one of the \$2,000 SMSU tuition scholarships awarded to the three first-place winners in the 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> grade categories.

The highlight of the contest is the Annual Creating Spaces Awards Ceremony, hosted by the SMSU English Program on a Sunday in April each year. At the awards ceremony, student writers gather with their families and teachers to be recognized for their achievements. They receive medals and the *Creating Spaces* anthology in which the winning pieces from every category and group are published. The first-place winners in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade category for fiction, nonfiction and poetry each receive an SMSU First-year Tuition Scholarship. This celebration begins with a keynote address by a published Midwest writer followed by a reception where the student writers meet each other, the SMSU student and faculty judges, and the keynote author.

## Keynote Speakers at the Creating Spaces Writing Contest

- 2005 – Larry Gavin
- 2006 – Rebecca Fjelland Davis
- 2007 – Bill Holm
- 2008 – Vincent Wixon
- 2009 – Mary Logue
- 2010 – Kristin Cronn-Mills
- 2011 – Rebecca Fjelland Davis
- 2012 – Nicole Helget and Nate LeBoutillier
- 2013 – Thomas Maltman
- 2014 – Saara Myrene Raappana
- 2015 – James A. Zarzana
- 2016 – Christine Stewart-Nuñez
- 2017 – James Autio
- 2018 – Geoff Herbach
- 2019 – Megan Maynor
- 2020 – Terri Michels

**Terri Michels** is the author of *Simon of Cyrene* and the *Legend of the Easter Egg*, a picture book, as well as 60 nonfiction books for children, including *Ellis Island*, *Life in the Time of Susan B. Anthony and the Women's Rights Movement*, *Manners on the Telephone*, and *The City Mayor*. She is also a photographer, focusing on nature, who has recently shown her work in several exhibits. As author, nurse, and photographer, Terri frequently speaks at schools and conferences about research, photography, and the writer's life.

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Finally, and most importantly, to all the parents, teachers, friends, and relatives who encourage children to read, write, and submit their best work to the Creating Spaces Writing Contest each year. We owe you our most heartfelt thanks.



