

CREATING SPACES

2021

**A collection of the winning writings of the 2021 writing competition
entitled *Creating Spaces: Giving Voice to the Youth of 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

**Emma Fosso
Raymond, MN
1st Place**

The Snow on the Trees

The snow on the trees
I flick off with my finger.
The snow on the trees
blows off into winter.
The snow on the trees
is so cold when I
touch it. The snow on
the trees has a
powdery touch to it.

Norah Siebert
Mountain Lake, MN
2nd Place

A Scribble

People say a scribble is a mess.
But I think that a scribble is art.
It deserves to be framed and loved.

People say mixing colors is a blob.
I say mixing colors looks pretty when they marble together.
It makes a different color... like purple.

Glitter is messy, say people.
But I think glitter is beautiful.
It should be on every masterpiece.

You see a mess,
I see art.
You see a blob,
I see a masterpiece.

Teo Winger
Mountain Lake, MN
3rd Place

Juggling

Juggling, juggling is very fun.
I like to juggle while I run.
I juggle in the gym,
and throw a ball to the rim.

I juggle with my dad,
even though I'm still a lad.
I juggle with my brother
and we pass clubs to each other.

I learn new tricks
that are really slick.
I try some flips,
and I hope I don't slip.

Juggling, juggling is very fun.
You should try it, everyone!

FICTION
Grades 3 & 4

Brekyn Klarenbeek
Hills, MN
1st Place

Katy the Super Horse

Once upon a time there was a horse named Katy. She lived on a farm where there was lots of people who came to ride her, and she never knew why. One day she went exploring and found a very crooked road. She decided to follow it but there was a fence in the way, so she charged it, and it broke!!

At first, she couldn't believe it, but then it was getting dark so she started her journey. She walked for a mile and didn't find anything, so she eventually found a nice and comfy place to sleep for the night. When she awoke, it was morning. She decided to head back on the road even though she was still tired. She had to keep going if she thought she was going to find out why people were coming to her farm.

That morning she saw a cow that was stuck in a fence! She had to help him but she didn't know how, so she started to run up a nearby mountain. At the top, Katy saw a very small cave, and she decided to go inside. Inside the cave there was something green that was glowing. She went closer. It looked like glowing grass, so she ate it. Katy went back to the cow and told him she didn't find anything. They started pushing and pulling, but nothing happened. She was going to give up after the last tug, but on the last tug she started glowing green. Suddenly the cow came out. It must have been the glowing grass she ate in the cave. She never knew that grass could be that powerful.

After that Katy decided to go home even if she didn't find the answers to why so many people came to her farm. She was just happy to help a new friend and have special

powers. When she got back to the farm her friend Sunny was waiting for her. Right when Katy came up to her she told Katy that she found out why people keep coming to their farm, but Katy interrupted her and said to Sunny that she has powers. Sunny looked surprised and told her to show her. She lifted a big fence and Katy had super strength!! Sunny could not believe it. Then Sunny told Katy about her news and told her that so many people were coming to their farm because the owners needed money. And that was all. Sunny was thinking about what name she could call Katy (because she had powers). So, Sunny gathered all the animals on the farm except for Katy, then they all thought of a name to give Katy. The dog named Bear and the pigs and goats thought the name should be Super Katy, The Flying Horse, but the horses and the cows thought it should be Super Horse. Then all the animals put their ideas together and made one.

The next day Katy was out in the prairie and the animals came together and all said, “You are Katy the Super Horse.” After that they had a party in the barn while the owners were asleep. Then the next day Katy got sick, and none of them knew why. The owners took her to the vet, and she had to have surgery. After the surgery, she had to stay in the barn for five weeks.

When the five weeks were over—which took forever for her—she was on her feet again, but her powers were gone! Katy couldn’t believe it. She went back to the cave, and the glowing thing that looked like grass was gone. She fell into tears and thought she would never have her powers back ever again. As she walked back home she said to herself that she was nothing without her powers. When she got back to the farm, everyone was disappointed and went to their stalls to take a nice long nap, but Katy couldn’t because she had too much stuff on her mind.

The next day, Katy was on her morning walk, but it wasn't much of a walk because she was gloomy. She saw a glowing thing in the distance, and she wondered if it was the thing she found in the cave. Could it be? When she got closer she saw it; it was her powers! She couldn't believe that one of their cows stole her powers. Katy asked the cow to give her powers back, but the cow did not, so Katy got all her friends to come to explain to the cow what had happened—that she lost them during the surgery. Still the cow did not, and he ran away into the woods, never to be seen again.

That night she saw a slight green thing glowing inside her. Could her powers not be gone? There was only one way to find out. Katy went outside to lift 20 bales of hay and ...

It worked. She had her powers back. The bad thing was they weren't as powerful as before, but she still had them. That night she and Sunny decorated the barn and all the farm animals came and had yummy cake. After the party, all her friends went to sleep. Katy looked out the barn door and kept reminding herself she was special, with or without her powers. And every day after that she was the most powerful horse in the barn.

Ryker Gehrke
Beaver Creek, MN
2nd Place

The Journey of Color

Chapter 1: The Day Everything Went Away

Once upon a time, well, there was time...and space. When? Good question, but we don't really know. Not only was there space and time, there was color, one color and out of all the colors, it was black, boring, plain black. Why? How did it get here? Someway, somehow, things were here and there. Before this time colors were everywhere, vibrant colors! Colors like the blue sky, pink flowers, and the green trees! Not everything was darkness because the colors were the light! But one day, a darkness struck. This is usually normal for humans because things like this happen every day, well, I should say every night. You see, every night darkness covers half the world, while others can just take a stroll downtown. But something was different on this day. It was early, too early, to be nighttime. The world was dark, colors were muffled, and everyone was panicking. Hours passed but the sun never seemed to shine... so nothing was vibrant.

Let's take a minute and focus on color. Not only is color, color but color is emotion—it is happiness, sadness, and all the others. Humans change their emotion when they see colors! Don't believe me? Look it up! It's true! The day the Earth lost light was a symbol of how light and color is in fact what makes up me, you, them, us, and everything in between. We are color, they are color—everything is color and there's nothing else which is colorless, not even black.

Black is a color, no matter what. It's just a little boring! And colors offer infinite possibilities. There is no stopping

colors from becoming other colors. But just why is yellow, yellow? Why is pink, pink? Do you think they had a choice? No, they didn't have a choice. They just are. Why are there infinite possibilities? Well think about it; if a color has a seemingly impossible small amount of shade to it, it's still a different color! How? So is there an end to new colors? No, there is not. There are so many different combinations it will never end! What happened on the day everything went away? Everyone panicked, but why? Well, what would you do when everything went away? Just stand there? No! You would hope everything came back, and evidently, it would. Everything would come back, and it would be normal. And so did you get your answer? I guess you did, huh? Then why are you still here? Go somewhere, do something, and most importantly be something! Not a pitch-black room of darkness. Be vibrant! Don't be the same, be independent! Be...colorful!

Chapter 2: The Day Everything Came Back

So you are still here? I told you to go! Huh. So what do you want? Oh! You want to know what the people did when everything went away! Understandable. I will tell you. Oh! I know where to start! When everything went away, everyone got worried, shocked, and asked the same questions. Why? And how? No one knew the answer, but there was still hope. Hope for the light and colors to come back. So, everyone prayed for it to come back. And nothing happened. The hope was mostly in the town of Colorsville. The people there absolutely lived to be colorful! These people, unlike us, were orange, purple, yellow, red, green, pink, and even rainbow! People called them weird and wacky, but it was normal for them to hear these things, so they soon learned to ignore them. Together, all these people built a town to show how different and colorful they could be! They people called it

Colorsville because of all the color. Pretty generic name in my opinion! Anyway, when people saw this town they got the wrong message. They called it “home of the freaks” and other names. But they learned to ignore it. The town was on the news a few times, but everyone forgot it existed. Until this one day. The people of Colorsville prayed for the colors to come back. Everyone in the town prayed, but unlike the others, something happened.

Color spread out across the area, making the town vibrant and colorful! It worked! How could they do this when the others couldn't? Well, maybe because of their soul. Their colorful, wonderful, and vibrant soul. Their soul showed the world that color isn't just a shade of something. It's everything. Soon, from space, you could see the world glow. It shined brighter than the sun! It was more vibrant than before. The world looked like a painter's palette with all the different colors! It was beautiful! Everyone was overjoyed, ecstatic, and for once, at peace. People were grateful but confused. How? Why? They asked all around the world, but they didn't find an answer. Until they reached Colorsville. They asked the townsfolk and were answered by one of the civilians.

“What is your name?” said a news reporter.

“Henry Hagleson,” he said.

“Well, do you know how the earth turned more colorful again, Henry?” the news reporter said.

“Well, yes I do,” said Henry. “Everyone in this town prayed and hoped with all of our souls for everything to come back,” he said.

“Why did it work with you guys and not the rest of the world?” the news reporter said.

“It's probably because we are color. Aren't we? Anyway, we had more hope and had a stronger prayer. That's probably why,” Henry said.

Things calmed down and the world adjusted to the new colors. People thanked Henry Hagleson for the discovery! Well, I guess that's the end! We have been through so much! The fall of the colors and the rise of the colors! The search to find why and how! Finally, we found out how to be colorful! Thank you for listening. The end!

Chapter 3: Reality

"Welp! We're out of pages! I guess that's the end!" said Grandpa.

"Really? There's no more?" said Chase.

"See, nothing in there but already read pages!" said Grandpa.

Plot twist!

Chase's grandpa was the narrator! Didn't see that coming didja? Anyway, let's get on with this story shall we?

"There's no more pages and I want to go fishing!" said Grandpa. Before he left he gave Chase a big ol hug and said, "But I also forgot this." Grandpa dug through his bag for a while till he hit the bottom and found just what he needed. He pulled out a map—a map to Colorville.

"But Grandpa, Colorville isn't real!" said Chase while wondering if maybe it was. It was at this moment that Chase knew what he would do the next Friday night. He would go get his friends and find Colorville! He planned to go to the magical land of yellow and orange townsfolk and find everything his grandpa told him in that story. But maybe it wasn't a story; maybe it was real.

Chapter 4: Out of the Door

Later that night, Chase was eating a bologna and pickle sandwich as he watched TV on the couch. When the TV show was over he looked at the giant glass clock by the stairs and said in his head, "Ok, It's getting close to 7:30. Soon I

will use my plan to sneak out of the house!” Chase slowly but surely got off the couch and tiptoed to the door. But suddenly he heard his mom, and she said, “Where are you going young man?”

“I was going to Justin’s house,” said Chase. His mom said he should have told her first. The funny thing is he was actually going to Justin’s house. As he walked out onto the street he looked at the stars. Then he started seeing constellations. First, he saw one that looked like a paint brush, then one like a canvas. Next, he saw a bucket of paint. Together he saw the stars painting the canvas with a paintbrush and a bucket of paint. It was a starry, spacey masterpiece. Before he knew it, he was at Justin’s house. He knocked on the door hoping he was home—he was. Chase asked him to come with him to Colorsville.

Justin asked, “What is Colarshill? Is that some kind of town?”

“Correct! It’s a town! Also it’s C-O-L-O-R-S-V-I-L-L-E not Colarshill!” said Chase.

“Ok got that...well, not really but if it is an opportunity to hang out with you, I’ll do it! Also, I have to bring my sis with me.”

“Why?” asked Chase.

“Cuz we are not getting along so well so my parents make us do everything together.”

His sister Ruby came out of her bedroom, went down the stairs and by the front door. “Hey guys!” Ruby said, “What are we gonna do today, Chase?”

“I know what we’re gonna do. We’re gonna... “

Chapter 5: Adventure!

Chase showed them the map and they made a plan.

Ruby said, “We need to go quickly!”

“Why?” asked Chase.

“So I can spend less time with Justin.”

And so it began. The three kids ran out into the fields, valleys and plains until a gaping gorge blocked the path.

Chase said, “I think my grandpa wanted us to go here because the gorge is on the map!”

“Well, how are we gonna get across?” asked Justin.

“I know!” replied Chase. He bent down and began to pray.

“What are you doing?” asked Ruby.

“Just watch,” said Chase. Then everything turned white. When the white cleared, a rainbow bridge was across the gaping gorge.

“HOW IS THAT POSSIBLE!?!?!?” said Ruby about to pass out from disbelief.

“I think that’s magic, dawg!” said Justin.

“It worked in the story; it will work here,” Chase said to himself.

And so they traveled more and more across the land passing signs along the way. They noticed something while they were walking along a highway. A rainbow car raced by the group at lightning speed. Faster than the speed limit for sure. It left them dizzy since all the bright colors went by so fast! The kids were confused.

“What was that?” asked Ruby.

“I—well, I don’t really know. Could you tell what that was Justin?” asked Chase.

Ruby was about to say something but was interrupted by a loud VRRROOMMM noise. The rainbow car from earlier came back. A voice was talking from the car. “Are you kids lost?”

“Well in a way you could say that,” replied Chase.

“Well, hop in!” the voice said.

“Woah, woah, woah! We are not going to hop in a car with some random stranger!” said Ruby.

The driver of the car said, “Who taught you to think I’m a random stranger?”

Chase said, “Can you at least give your name? Maybe that would jog our memory.”

“Well, I’ll give you my name. It starts with an H, and well, does not end with an H but it’s close! Henry Hagleson is the name sir!”

Then something rushed through Chase’s mind. He felt that he’d heard that name just days before his adventure began. Then he remembered. He remembered everything. He remembered hearing the same name in a book with a rainbow cover called *The Day Everything Went Away*. He heard the story and it was ingrained in his head. Isn’t the story why he came here in the first place? He now knew what this meant. The whole thing was real. Since Henry was real, everything in the story must be real. He thought that maybe it would be okay to pick up the pace and get some wheels. And so, he hopped in the rainbow car and talked his friends into joining him.

Chapter 6: Road Trip!

“Alright, where are you guys going?” Henry said.

“We’re going to Colorsville.” said Chase.

“Whoa, slow down there, pal!” said Henry. “That’s quite a ways away! Are you sure that’s where you wanna go?”

“Isn’t that close?” asked Chase.

“Well it isn’t anymore... you see, my home town was a normal town. Until the discovery of me saving everyone from the color problem. The only other thing that really happened in the town is when people were stopping by to call us ugly sadly. And now we have been noticed. And now everyone comes to see us only because of our color and all of that junk. Now they’re using us to make action figures, movies, comics, and even TV shows. They don’t even care

about us anymore; they just pretend they do so we agree to make all these toys and movies and other junk. And since they wanted more and more money they moved all of us to a large city so people can come and see us easier. But it's not because they want people to see one of us in real life—oh no, no, no—it's so they can charge people to talk and take pictures with us....” Henry said while frowning.

“Wow...that's really sad,” said Chase.

“I agree,” said Ruby.

“That's just disgusting, dawg!” said Justin.

“Yeah, it sure is. Anyway, want me to take you to where it is right now?” asked Henry.

“Yes,” said Chase, “we would like to go there.”

The ride went smoothly. Everyone was pretty happy. Justin was playing this console, Ruby was reading a long, hardcover book and Henry was whistling his favorite song as he drove. See? Everything is going good! Well, not for Chase. Chase listened to everything Henry said about this home town being abandoned for some company's greed. He was angry. He knew after he reached his goal he would start a new one: save everyone in that one, large city. He knew this wasn't the way it was supposed to be. With those thoughts and feelings in his head, the ride continued. It was quiet. It was very quiet. Everyone was minding their own business until Ruby asked Chase a question. “Hey Chase, where did you hear of Henry? I mean, me and Justin have never heard of him. Are you sure he isn't just some random stranger?”

“Oh...,” said Chase, trying to think of a way not to sound crazy while thinking, ‘it's a character I've read about in a fiction book.’ So instead of saying all of that he just said, “Um, I saw him on a TV show!”

At that moment Henry jumped in to help with the situation, “I was on TRN—True Real News.”

“Thanks for telling me, Henry. I didn’t wanna get kidnapped!” said Ruby.

Henry smiled and changed the radio to play music. It started to play calm, relaxing music. Ruby and Chase eased into their seat and almost fell asleep! Henry almost did, too! After a while Henry parked in the parking lot of a pizza place. Everyone fell asleep in the car because it had gotten dark after driving so long. Well, except for Justin. The battery on his console died, and so he looked away from the screen to notice everyone had gone asleep. He thought about sleeping, too, but when he was about to fall asleep he heard a noise. Then he looked at the radio and looked on the channel. It was calm, relaxing music 101. He looked at everyone fast asleep. He knew what he had to do.

“This is gonna be the best prank ever!” he said with a long sinister grin across his face. He slowly crawled to change the channel. When he got there he turned the volume up to 100% and then he thought of which channel to change it to. He knew that anyone would work that wasn’t calm, relaxing music 101, but he wanted something SUPER loud. Something that would blow up their eardrums and make them scream! Then he saw a billboard sign that said that there was a rock concert tonight that would also be broadcast on the radio. He turned it to the station as the music was building up and slowly getting louder. The music finally went off and the car was vibrating! Henry and Ruby woke up in a flash to hear the disrupting music. It hurt their ears so bad!

“WHAT THE HECK WAS THAT FOR?!?!?” Henry said yelling. Soon Justin shut off the radio and tried to go back to sleep.

“Well, since we’re all up why not get something to eat?” asked Henry.

“That sounds great,” said Chase. “The pizzeria by us says that it’s open 24-7, so why not?” And so they stepped into the store to order.

They took their order and walked back to the car. They opened the pizza up and started to eat. As they enjoyed the pizza they slowly drifted to sleep in the car with some pizza bits on their mouth.

The moon glowed a bright white that night. The stars were shining brighter than fireworks. For once everyone was happy this time with their sweetest of dreams. Little did they know back home things weren’t that fine. It was pretty bad really. Things didn’t look so good at all. The problem? No one knew where Chase, Justin and Ruby were. They were missing. And someone had to find them. But just who would it be?

Chapter 7: The Missing Three

Justin’s parents were sitting around and thought it was time for their kids to return home. His father opened the door and yelled, “Justin! It’s time to come back inside! Hum, that’s weird. No answer?” He looked in the yard and ran back inside to tell his wife, “ROSE THE KIDS ARE GONE!”

Rose, Justin’s mom, said, “Calm down! Just check his watch! That’s the whole reason we bought it! So we could find him when he gets lost! Now go check the app!”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and checked the app. The app reported they were 96 miles away. His dad tried to calm Rose down but had to be honest, “ROSE, THERE IS NO WAY THEY COULD RUN THAT FAR. THEY HAVE BEEN KIDNAPPED—100%—AND THERE IS NO WAY THEY HAVEN’T BEEN.”

They called Chase’s mother to ask for her help. She admitted that she hadn’t seen her son in some time. Her

father, Chase's grandpa, remembered he had given Chase the map to Colorsville. He never thought that he would take it so seriously. He should have known. He was so interested in that story that he would think the map was real. Now he knew that he must save them. He quickly volunteered to help and offered up an idea on where the children might be headed.

Chapter 8: Almost there!

After a long night of sleeping in a car and eating pizza the children finally woke up from a long night's rest. That morning Henry drove for hours and hours. When he was driving, he looked at the back of the car. He saw all three children were sleeping. He kept on driving until he heard a buzzing noise. At first, he checked his phone. Nothing. Then he checked his watch. Nothing. Then it buzzed again. It sounded like it was coming from the back of the car. Then he saw a message on Justin's watch. The watch said that his parents were looking for him and showed he had 14 missed calls from his mother and father.

"Oh no. Looks like I gotta do this quickly. Otherwise I might go to jail." Fortunately he saw a sign that said, "Welcome to Cyberus City!" The traffic in Cyberus City was huge! Millions of cars were lined up to go to Cyberus City!

Meanwhile a van full of parents were heading into the same traffic. Rose checked the app and exclaimed, "We're so close to the kids! The kidnapper is in this very traffic jam!" Everyone cheered knowing that they were almost there. Carol started honking their horn loudly. Henry could hear the horn and looked back through the rearview mirror. He saw three angry parents and one angry grandpa.

Chapter 9: Road Rage

“HONK LOUDER!” yelled Rose.

Meanwhile in Henry’s car, “Lemme check what’s making that annoying noise that woke us up!” Chase said. He peered out of the window to see his mom and his grandpa. He thought, it surely couldn’t be them.

“What are you talking about?” asked Justin. Then he peered out as well and saw his parents.

“I suppose I should explain this and just walk away. I mean, I don’t wanna go to jail because I gave a kid a free ride y’know?” Henry said.

“No Henry,” said Chase. “Don’t walk away from this situation. I’ll just tell my mom that you’re taking me to Colorsville and that she can pick me up later. Can you roll down the window please?” The car’s window rolled down. Chase stuck out his head to talk. “Mom I don’t need help. I’m trying to get to a place and this guy just let us hitch a ride.”

His mother couldn’t hear him and instead thought he was screaming for help. She used her father’s cane and threw it out the window. It hit the back window of the car and kept going through it and hit the front window of the car. Henry lost control of the car; it swerved. It kept swerving until it fell into a ditch. The car was turned sideways with smoke coming out of every side. “Is everyone okay?” Henry said. He couldn’t hear any answers.

As the adults approached they started yelling for their children. Chase crawled out of the car and went to hug this mom. Justin and Ruby exited next. They went to their mom and dad, too, who quickly asked who had kidnapped them.

Chase said, “We were not kidnapped, we were only hitching a ride to Colorsville.”

His mother told him that wasn’t even a real place. That is when his grandpa saw a nearby sign. He smiled and said,

“If you said it’s not real then you’re wrong! Just look at the sign over there!” Everyone looked at the sign that said “Welcome to Colorsville!”

Chapter 10: Welcome!

“Oh my gosh...,” everyone said at the same time.

“Oh that’s not really something special around where I live. That’s probably because I live there,” Henry said while getting out of the car.

“Who said that?” Rose asked.

“It would be me ma’am,” Henry said.

“Are you the one who hitched our kids a ride?” James said.

“Very much so.”

While everyone else was talking to Henry about what happened while they were gone Chase, Justin, and Ruby were admiring the town. “Woah...,” Chase thought. He felt so accomplished and so complete once he got to see the town. He remembered everything that led up to this very moment. He remembered the loud blasting rock concert on the radio. He remembered eating at Perfection Pepperoni. He remembered sleeping in the car. He remembered thinking he had to stop the evil companies that used people for money. His brain thought, then he remembered that he still had one thing to do. And if it was anything it would be very serious business. Very serious business. He knew that he wasn’t complete.

Chapter 12: Greed’s Karma

“What job are you talking about, Chase?” Justin asked.

“Yeah, Chase, what are you talking about?” Ruby said.

“Well, do you guys remember Henry’s story?”

They both nodded their heads.

“Well, when he said that they used people from Colorsville for money, I got angry. I wanted to stop them. And now that I’m at the end of the road I took a second to remember past memories that we made together. That is when I remembered all of this. That’s when I knew I had to make things right.”

“Hey there, guys,” Henry said. “I overheard you talking about the business stuff I talked about in the car. So, how are we gonna break in and shut them down?”

“We shouldn’t break into their HQ,” said Ruby. “We should start a movement to stop all this nonsense!”

“That’s a great idea Ruby!” Justin said. “Just how do we do it?”

“I have an idea!” Chase said. “We should tell every Colorsville civilian to deny every permission letter to make toys, movies, furnishings, plushies, and decorations!”

“I can tell them,” said Henry. “I’m basically a celebrity in Colorsville, so they will listen to me.”

Henry took out his phone and recorded a video of him saying to deny every permission application to make merchandise. After a few minutes the video blew up on the Internet. Every Colorsville citizen saw the post and did as told. Soon after, other people started to post these kinds of videos. Before long there were over 100,000 videos saying there would be no more endorsements from Colorsville. They even used and spread #colordeny.

After a long while people started to protest at the company’s HQs. Colorsville related items were off the shelves. Not because they were selling fast but because they weren’t selling at all. A few weeks after Chase’s adventure was complete, he was lying in bed, thinking happy thoughts about how he could finally feel complete. He felt good inside. He remembered the story and everything that happened after. He was smiling a large smile on his face. He

was so very happy. He remembered what the book told him to do—to be colorful. He wasn't darkness. He was a bright thinker and a friend you could always count on. He wasn't the same either. He was standing out from the crowd when he thought to get people to ban any Colorsville merchandise. He thought something no one else thought of. He was colorful. And no one was going to stop that. No one ever could. And just think about it; whoever would?

Penni Moore
Hills, MN
3rd Place

Friends Forever

One day there was a little girl named Lillie who was joyfully running around in her yard. Suddenly, she saw something scamper across the grass. It was quite colorful, but she had no idea what it could be. While Lillie was normally very frightened, this time she went up and followed the creature with excitement flowing through her.

Just as she had finally gotten close enough to pounce up onto it her mother called her in for dinner. Lillie told her family about the amazing sight and they all agreed to help find it once they were done eating. Slowly they went creeping outside so they wouldn't scare away whatever it was. Then Lillie's brother, Hop, yelled, "I found it, I found it!" They all walked towards where Hop had been, and sure enough he had the tiny thing in his arms. In his arms he held a soft animal just a little bigger than a loaf of bread, and it almost looked like a baby dragon.

Then Lillie suddenly started to whimper with fear. Her mother tried to soothe her by talking calmly and said, "Everything will be alright."

But Lillie still had a feeling that nothing was alright. Their family took the creature inside since it didn't look healthy. They decided they would begin to search for the right home for such an unusual creature. Every day Hop would visit lots of houses to ask if they would like to take in the creature, but all he heard was the same word—no.

Lillie was still very scared of it so she wasn't much help. One day the little girl fell off her playset and the creature unexpectedly came up and licked her leg. That was all it

took. After that day, the two of them became great friends. They loved to play, run, chase, and cuddle together every day.

After much searching, Hop had a little luck, because someone said yes to his request. When Lillie heard the news, she was heartbroken. She had bonded with the little one so much that it hurt to know it would be leaving so soon. The pickup time would be in two days, so they had to get the creature looking its best. After a long bath, they were ready for the lady to come.

When the woman arrived, Lillie could feel tears about to come, but she knew she could not let them. As Lillie watched the lady take her new friend away, she couldn't hold the tears back any longer so she started to cry. Big round tears came from her eyes, pouring out lots of salty water. Then suddenly the woman stopped. She asked what was wrong, but Lillie did not answer.

Thankfully the lady loved children and had an idea of what had prompted the girl to be so sad. She said, "I promise you will be able to come by my house any time to see your friend."

And from that day Lillie still had a best friend to play with.

POETRY
Grades 5 & 6

Royalle Siedschlag
Slayton, MN
1st Place

Night to Day

Stars dance to the night's beat of
the owl singing and the wolf howling.
The stars listen to the rhythm of the night.

The trees hum and sway with the owl's song.
The river rushes like the streets of New York.
The wolf stops to watch the stars
as they dance in the night.

As the wind whispers to the trees
the stars stop to hear the rushing
of the river in the night.
When dawn approaches the night,
the rhythms stop; then the morning starts its song.

Addy Dierks
Slayton, MN
2nd Place

When the Sun Hides

When the sun hides it gets dark,
and sad,
he is not his bright self.
He hides himself
from the dangers
of the underworld.

At day,
the sun is like a bright shooting star
going across the sky.
At night,
he is hidden
fighting other mysteries.

Where the sun hides,
well he doesn't like to tell.
A hint;
he is under the clouds.

It gets dark,
he gets scared.
The clouds take over.
Sometimes it starts to rain.
He cries.

But he always comes back out.
His bright,
shining self.

Madison Gehrke
Marshall, MN
3rd Place

Always a Kid

18 doesn't mean all grown up
and I kind of like being a kid, so I get up and say
oh hey

no matter how old I get, there will always be a kid inside of me
because getting older
only means you're older

and the little kid inside of me never goes away
and I don't need to worry about growing up
and that's fine by me any day

and no matter how old I get, there will always be
a kid inside of me
because getting older
only means you're older

yeah, we all have a kid inside
and no, it's nothing to hide
and it might take some time to find
way deep inside your mind

no matter how old I get, there will always be a kid inside of me
because getting older
only means you're older

no matter how old I get to be
I will always be me
and I'm a kid
always a kid

FICTION
Grades 5 & 6

Lindsey Setrum
Raymond, MN
1st Place

The Secret Trail

She knew it before it happened. The vision in her mind was clear; she was going to crash. The dogsled jolted, and she was flung from it. She landed hard and somersaulted down the steep slope right into the trunk of a tall evergreen. She lay among the needles gasping, trying to breathe.

She sucked in breath by breath, slowly regaining her strength.

She rolled onto her stomach and pushed herself up. Cleo crawled up the hill trying to see the dogs. She wished she knew they were okay.

As soon as she reached the top of the slope she ran to the dogs who were all sprawled across the ground eating snow. She breathed a silent sigh of relief.

Meanwhile the dogs had risen at the sight of her and were wagging their snow covered tails. She went over to check for broken equipment.

Tia, her lead dog, had a broken harness.

“Good thing I brought extras,” Cleo thought as she clipped it on. Luckily nothing had fallen out as she had tied it tightly to the sled, but it was tipped and needed to be righted.

Thrash’s sled was coming around the corner, and Cleo was regretting earlier when they had tossed cocky insults at each other.

“I’m going to pay for that,” she said thinking out loud. Groaning, she rose to her feet and got the dogs standing. Thrash sped past her and soon turned the corner.

“Second place again, shucks!” he called with an evil laugh.

One hour earlier she had been in the lead by at least ten minutes. Now she had fallen behind by at least five.

She hopped back on the sled and started moving once again. She was gaining but not fast enough. She was losing hope but still pushed on.

Suddenly, she saw a side trail cut into the main path. She accidentally sped right past it and had to do a u-turn, which slowed her down.

After turning around, she made a sharp turn to get on the side trail. She closed her eyes just in time to be slapped multiple times by thin branches.

As she gathered speed she could hear the cheers and boos of the crowd as Thrash neared the finish line.

Cleo was almost at the end of the trail, and the dogs gave one last push of speed. They burst out into the open and cut in front of Thrash.

Her sharp turn made her lose the extra momentum, and Thrash was soon even with her. They were too concentrated to toss anymore insults.

They were neck to neck, and they still were as she broke through the finish ribbon.

Lindsey Setrum
Raymond, MN
2nd Place

The Journey of the Wild

Hunters were after her. She knew how to hunt, but not contained. She hunted wild and free. Tia knew the ways of the woods far better than any hunter. She was a wild dog. When she was a small pup her home had burned. Everyone thought she had died, well not that anybody cared. So she grew up fierce and without love. There it was! The small deer path brought her back to her senses. She made a sharp turn.

After Tia “disappeared,” she heard the confused voices of the hunters. She trotted down the path until her cave came into view. As soon as she stepped a paw in she heard a growl. Suddenly she smelled a grizzly bear. Tia thought about giving up the cave, then thought about how well it had served her. Tia wasn’t going to give this place up without a fight. Just then the bear came out. They circled each other, then Tia lunged, nipped, and dodged the bear’s claws. So it went on, lunge, nip, and dodge. The attack plan went well until the bear had had enough. It took a final stroke at her. Its claws raked down her leg. Then the bear left, deciding it wasn’t worth the fight.

Tia smelled something as soon as the bear’s stench was gone. Hunters. She whimpered and moved to the back cave.

(three days later)

She was laying on some damp moss, still in the back of the cave. As the scent became stronger she became weaker. If the hunters found her she feared she would be a dead dog. Even for a dog like Tia, hunters were a sight to fear. Something brought her back to her senses. Footsteps. As she

lifted her eyes, Tia stared right into the eyes of a hunter. It was a young woman. Her face showed no kind of aging. She seemed almost... nervous? Tia saw the stick clenched tightly in her hand a second after she made the conclusion. Any hope of mercy was dashed. She growled, and the woman raised the stick. Tia closed her eyes and waited to feel the sharp blow. Instead she heard a gasp, then a clatter. Then soft hands feeling around her wound.

The last thing Tia remembered was being held tenderly in someone's arms. She woke laying on a woven grass mat. She was in a cabin. It had one bedroom, a kitchen, and a living room. She got up and the woman came to her. She began fondling her ears. The woman began walking while petting her ears. It felt so good that Tia followed her to a room Tia had not known was there. It had a pristine white latrine, a tub, and sink. The woman picked Tia up and placed her in a tub of lukewarm water. Then she began to wash out years of filth. The woman then wrapped her leg and brushed her matted hair. They walked around town and stopped at a bakery to get a bread bone. When they were walking back Tia saw dogs being led to the woods. They were hunting. Tia longed to go home, but she resisted the urge. When they returned Tia settled down on the doorstep. Later the woman came out, knocking Tia off the step. The woman rushed to her apologizing. Tia then thought, "This is what it feels like to be loved."

(Later that night)

Tia's ears perked up. She heard a commotion outside. Tia slowly pushed her head through the door. She froze. GUNFIRE. She sprinted to the bedroom and tore the covers off the woman. Rain (the woman's name) started to resist then she too heard the gunfire. Immediately she packed blankets and clothes into a shoulder bag. Rain then strapped a bag of food and water onto Tia.

Rain picked up Tia and jumped out the window. They ran towards the villagers waiting in the woods. They ran for what felt like hours, which... it probably was. The only time rest occurred was when the woods were silent. Somebody screamed, and everyone turned around. The woods were FLAMING. The attackers were burning the woods to get to the villagers! They sprinted, ducked under flaming branches and jumped over charred logs until they reached the lake. There was one word to describe it, Breathtaking. Also there was a faint roaring sound. The crackling and smoke was what brought them back to reality. They began the ongoing run.

Someone stopped abruptly. He called out something as a village woman bumped into him causing him to disappear. Waterfall. That is what the man had said, and he hadn't disappeared. He had fallen over the edge! Rain and Tia were lurched forward. They both were nearing the edge. One after another the villagers were being dragged over by the person they were holding! Now it was Tia and Rain's turn!!! The ground was cut off and they found themselves falling into icy cold water. Frankly, it felt like they had been slapped.

After that mishap, they crawled ashore coughing and sputtering. After minutes of sitting there, they continued their journey. They didn't have much hope then, all of them sopping wet and miserable. The food was ruined and their shoes soggy, but on they went until they came across a large city. Rain washed Tia and re-banded her leg. Then she washed herself and called to Tia, "Come here, girl! Time to go to bed." So Tia went and hopped onto the bed. She then had the thought about love again.

(Early the next morning)

The sun had risen and the birds were chirping their merry songs once again. They heard a sharp knock on the house door. Rain hurried to the door and opened it. The village

headman walked in and surveyed their surroundings. It wasn't much, just a little kitchen which ran into the living room and a closed door which led to the bedroom and bathroom. He seemed to have something on his mind. As if he had read her mind, he began to speak. "You will release the dog, or it will be taken by force."

It! Released! Since when was she a captive or an IT! Humans! Tia added her voice as Rain was too stunned to talk. "Ruff ruff roooooof!" That's what she had to say!

Rain smiled and said that she couldn't release her.

The village headman then handed her a paper and left. The paper said, "You will release the dog by Dec. 10 or it will be forced out of your care. Please fill out this release form by Dec. 5. Thank you for understanding. Chief Demloe."

(Hours later)

"Chief Demloe, we have a problem. Rain is missing."

Rain and Tia sprinted under the cover of the trees. Tia was leading Rain to her cave. They arrived. Rain was surprised to see the place where Tia was found. They set up camp. The blankets were in one corner, the food and water hidden on a tiny ledge, and the clothes were Rain's pillow. It wasn't perfect, but it was the best they had. They ate a quick supper and went to sleep.

The next morning they heard voices. It was a village search party. They were silent. They passed over the cave and continued. Rain quickly prepared breakfast and swallowed it down nervously. Tia had gone out hunting right before the strangers came and now returned. She had caught only a rabbit. It was dark early so they went to bed.

Rain was weak with hunger and cold. She had stood and fallen and eventually went unconscious. Tia had started barking furiously, and the villagers had come and found them. Rain was lying in bed. She was no longer deathly sick,

but it was still decently bad. Months earlier she had been found and she showed no sign of improving. Now, weeks later, she could walk again. When she was walking Tia would follow her until she went to bed, then she would lay at Rain's feet.

Rain had finally begun to recover from the sickness. Now she had something else to worry about. The headman had let Tia stay so far, but not for long. Rain was heading out to talk with the headman about the dog. "Rain I can't have a dog just roaming around!"

"Please, I'll do anything for her! Remember she was the one who saved my life. You can't just let that pass!"

The headman then stared at her and said, "Give me some time to think."

It was a week later and he finally gave her his answer.

"Yes sir, I will take care of buying her food. I'll run her out on the prairie every day!"

"Then my answer is...yes. But, if she is so much as a bother, she will be taken away."

"Oh thank you!" she cried, then ran to Tia and hugged her. "Yes, Yes, Yes!"

(two years later)

Rain had still kept her promise, so the headman allowed her to have two dogs. (Although he still didn't like Tia.) Marty, the new dog, had been found in the woods by Tia who now had a certain disliking for him as he got more attention. So now with two dogs running on the prairie it gave Rain much joy. But even now, she still remembers the Journey of the Wild.

Ava Lepp
Butterfield, MN
3rd Place

A Change of Heart

Long ago there was a very old king named Klaus. He had a shiny gold crown with red rubies, blue sapphires, and one white, shiny pearl. He had a red velvet cape with wolf fur on the sides. Klaus lived in an old castle in France. The castle was black, stretching five stories high, with two balconies and a secret passageway. Klaus loathed Christmas. He was very tight-fisted, but his niece, Skylar, who had just moved in with her Uncle Klaus, loved Christmas.

Skylar couldn't afford much. She was able to buy a slice of bread, and a cup of milk a week. Her clothes were torn, dirty, and old. She was nineteen years old with brown hair, a fair complexion, and pure green eyes. Her uncle did not care how she looked and would not give her money. Her birthday was on Christmas morning.

A week before Christmas her great grandfather Ebenezer Scrooge got sick. Scrooge had once been a grumpy old man who hated Christmas, but now he was a merry, jolly man. He was in St. Cuthbert's Hospital in London. Skylar wanted to visit her great grandfather, but she couldn't visit him. Her uncle would not let her.

Skylar lived on the first floor of the castle in the smallest room. Uncle Klaus banned Skylar from seeing Scrooge because years ago he had had an argument with Scrooge. She began to pack a bag. She packed a blanket, pillow, a coat, and some money. Skylar decided to climb out her bedroom window. She noticed something sketchy about the window. It was a secret passageway, and it was a shortcut to London!

It was two weeks before Christmas Day. Skylar was hurrying along through the passageway, when she found a heap of food, clothes, jewelry, and a picture with Klaus and an elegant woman standing beside him. Skylar wondered who the woman was. She did not know that the elegant woman was his wife, named Ruth. Skylar was three quarters of the way through the 2236 mile passageway.

Meanwhile Klaus was wondering where Skylar went. Suddenly he remembered that the room Skylar was living in had the secret passageway! So Klaus scrambled into the passageway. He saw that the food, clothes, and the picture had been touched. Klaus was furious that his wife's belongings had been touched, for they were vital to him.

A gentleman with dark brown, green eyes, black top hat, and a stylish long coat was walking by the passageway on his way, but something was moving behind the bush. He went to go investigate, to see what it was. He saw a girl coming out behind the bush and did not see where she came from. The girl had brown hair, green eyes, and a fair complexion.

The gentleman asked, "Where are you going?"

Skylar said, "St. Cuthbert's Hospital, where are you going?"

"Same place. Who are you visiting?"

"Ebenezer Scrooge. Who are you visiting?"

"Ebenezer Scrooge."

"Do you want to travel together?"

"Gladly." So they were on their way. They did not know they would be meeting Klaus later on.

A few moments later, Klaus came out of the tunnel where Skylar had passed through only a short time before. Then he remembered she wanted to see Scrooge. So he started to go to the hospital, but he remembered that he would have to meet Scrooge. He did not want to meet him

because Scrooge was so joyous and loved Christmas. It was only one day until Christmas Day. Klaus wanted to get to Skylar before Christmas Day, but she had gotten a head start.

It was Christmas Eve night, and Skylar was already at the hospital. She went to the counter and said, "I am Skylar, a relative of Scrooge. Can I visit him?"

The lady at the counter said, "You may visit him for a short time."

Skylar entered the room that Scrooge was in. It had baby blue curtains, a bed with crisp, white sheets, and a tray connected to the wall.

"Scrooge, I'm so glad to see you. Klaus would not let me come, but I am here now!" Skylar exclaimed.

"I am glad you're here, Skylar. I need to tell you something ..."

"Scrooge, what did you want to tell me?"

Scrooge did not respond. Skylar looked over at him and noticed that he was perfectly still. He was lying in his bed and all of a sudden he had a stroke and died while he was speaking.

Klaus just came into the room and yelled at Skylar, "I told you not to see Scrooge!" When Klaus came into the room, he saw that Scrooge was dead. Seeing Scrooge dead broke something in Klaus' cold heart. He wept. He was sorry that he was upset with Scrooge for loving Christmas. Klaus realized that Christmas really was a wonderful time of the year and Scrooge was a wonderful person. As Klaus bent over him, Scrooge's heart started to beat. Klaus gasped in disbelief. Scrooge was alive! Klaus never thought he would be relieved to see Scrooge alive.

"Klaus, people have to let their loved ones rest in peace; you have to let Ruth go," Scrooge proclaimed.

"I know, but it is hard to let her death go, and Skylar, thank you for not following my rules," said Klaus.

“Who was the girl in the picture?” asked Skylar.

“It was my wife, Ruth,” said Klaus.

“I have another surprise for you,” said Scrooge as Fred entered the room.

“Skylar, this is Fred, your older brother,” said Scrooge.

“What! We are siblings?” Skylar and Fred yelled in excitement at the same time.

“Thank you, Scrooge,” Klaus said as he squeezed his hand. Now that we all love Christmas let’s call the nurse and tell her to bring us a festive Christmas dinner.”

NONFICTION
Grades 5 & 6

Addy Dierks
Slayton, MN
1st Place

Thee Day

The day that changed my life. One minute I was having fun, the next well... It was my grandpa's birthday on a hot summer day, and we were jumping on my trampoline. It was my brother Aidan, my uncle, and obviously me. Little six year old me jumping on a trampoline. This is just a set up for disaster! We were all having fun, jumping, when I bounced a little too high. I landed on the middle part of the trampoline on my left arm. My arm turned all the way around. The bone broke and popped out of my skin.

I remember laying there looking at the sky. My uncle picked me up and my parents said, "Should I call 911 or should we just drive?" My uncle grabbed me and put me in the car. My dad put his hazards on, and we drove as fast as a cheetah chasing its prey.

I knew at that moment, my arm was bad. It didn't hurt, but it felt numb.

We got to the hospital and I saw the red emergency sign. We got out, and I heard the birds singing and the hustle of doctors and nurses. I was rushed into a hospital bed, and a nurse inserted an IV into my good arm. To this day I still don't like needles. Next, I was rushed into surgery to fix the bone and have a cast put on my arm. When I woke up my mom and dad said I was going to have a sleepover at the hospital. My dad stayed with me and nurses came to check on me every once and awhile.

The next morning, I got to go home, but I knew it was not the last time I would be at the hospital. I had two more surgeries after that. One for putting a rod in my arm, the

other for taking the rod out of my arm. I had two casts, three surgeries and 12 weeks in a cast. After all of that, I had to strengthen my arm. It wasn't long before I was back on the trampoline. To this day I still jump on my trampoline, but I am careful not to land on my arm!

Brystol Teune
Brandon, MN
2nd Place

My Washington, DC Trip

For my eighth birthday me, my mom and Samantha were going to Washington, DC. The night before we were supposed to leave the flight got canceled from a storm. That night we got a new flight in Omaha, so we picked up Samantha and drove there. I slept most of the way there because we left at 10 p.m., but the time I was awake the lightning lit up the sky. When we got there, it was 3 a.m. and the flight was at five in the morning. While we were waiting, I played on my iPad. The time went by fast. When we got on the plane I sat in the middle of my mom and a lady I did not know. On the plane, I watched movies. After the three hour flight, we finally got to Atlanta! When we got off the plane we went to go eat. The airport was so big that there was a train in it. When we got on the train it was very confusing. After about two hours of waiting we boarded the next flight.

The next flight was fast because I slept most of the way. After one hour and 30 minutes we landed in Washington, DC. The ceiling was made of windows in that airport. We got something to eat and got on the subway. We went to the hotel and got a polite greeting by the door men. We stayed at the Marriott. The hotel had a restaurant and Starbucks in it. We got to our hotel room, and I had to share a bed with my mom. After we unpacked we went to the Spy Museum. It was fun, and I learned a lot about spies. When we were done with the spy museum we went to the Shake Shack. It was delicious. Then we went to our room and watched movies and then went to bed. The next day we ate breakfast and took the subway to Arlington National Cemetery. There was a lot

of security. There are 639 acres of land and four hundred thousand graves. One of my favorite things there was the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Every hour from October 1st through March 31st and every thirty minutes from April 1st through September 30th The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier guard, also called Sentinels, take 90 steps a minute. Enough with the facts; let's continue the story.

Next, we went to the Lincoln Memorial. It was fun going to the Lincoln Memorial even though there is not too much to see. The saying above Lincoln's head is *"In this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the union, the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever."* Then we stopped for some ice cream. We sat outside and ate ice cream with a bunch of pigeons. I was freaking out that they were going to attack me, because I'm afraid of birds. After we got away from the birds we went to the Vietnam Memorial. There are 58,320 names on the Vietnam Wall.

Next, we went to the Korean National Memorial. There are 44,574 names on the wall. Once we were done with that we went to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial. This memorial was cool to look at. Then we ate some food. Afterwards, we walked to the Holocaust Museum. The Holocaust Museum was very interesting. There was a lot to read about. All the stories are really sad. I learned a lot there, and it was one of my favorite places.

We went back to the hotel and went swimming for a little bit. When we were done swimming, we got food from the restaurant in our hotel. After we ate I gave a homeless man some food. Then we went to bed. The next day we got Starbucks and took the subway to the Capital. The Capital had a lot of fun facts to share. I learned a lot there. They also had some pretty things there. After a lot of learning we sat down and ate.

When we were done eating we headed to the National Library. There we saw the oldest Bible. Next, we went to the National Museum of the American Indians. There was a lot of statues there. We watched a little show, too. When we were done with the museum part we went to buy souvenirs. There were a lot of cool souvenirs. When we finally picked which souvenirs we wanted, we headed to the Air and Space Museum. It was fun because there was a little scavenger hunt. After we finished our scavenger hunt we went to the gift shop. The gift shop was so big that there was an escalator in it. We went down the escalator and chose to get a capital logo set.

We went back to the hotel and slept. When the morning came, we went to the White House and got a tour. Most of the White House rooms were named off colors. My favorite rooms were the Blue Room and the Green Room. After we had our tour and took pictures, we went to this Oval Office photoshoot. We took a lot of random pictures, but I really enjoyed it. When we were done with our photoshoot we got some food at this delicious Mexican restaurant. I ordered some nachos.

After eating we went to a gift shop to get every family member a souvenir. They mostly got shirts. After a lot of walking it was the end of the day, so we went to our hotel and packed. The next morning was our last day in Washington, DC. We decided to go to the zoo for the last day. At the zoo, we saw a lot of animals we could not see at our zoo. It got so hot in the day there were mist sprinklers. That day I tried Dots Ice Cream for the first time. That zoo was one of my favorite zoos. I was sad we had to leave the zoo because that meant we had to go home.

We went to the airport. Our flight got delayed for a couple hours. The hours went by fast because we were exploring the airport. When we finally got on our plane, we

sat on the runway for thirty minutes because of the storm. Halfway in the flight the plane almost got struck by lightning!

When we landed we rushed to get off the plane. We started running to the next gateway. When we got there, nobody was in sight. We looked out the window and the plane was not there. Then somebody said that we just missed the plane. We looked to see if there were any rental cars that we could take, but there were none. My mom started calling hotels to see if they would let us in, but they didn't because it was one in the morning.

Finally, we found one. We took a bus to our hotel. My mom called Ryan to see if he would come pick us up. He said, yes, and got in the car. When we got to the room we passed out because we were so exhausted! After a couple hours of sleeping Ryan arrived. Ryan slept for a little bit before getting back on the road. The car ride was short because I slept most of the way.

We dropped Samantha off at her house and went to our house. We took a nap because it was seven in the morning. After a week, we went to the airport to get our suitcases. I was mad because my suitcase was scratched up. I really enjoyed my trip in Washington, DC. I learned a lot there and my trip was really exciting. Even though it was difficult getting there, it was fun.

Alexander Betz
Avoca, MN
3rd Place

My Last Week Fishing with My Great Grandpa

Have you ever been on an exhilarating fishing trip? Well, I have, and it was with my great grandpa, my fishing buddy. We were just having fun in the sun in the middle of summer. Let's start all the way from the beginning.

I was on the way to my great grandma's and great grandpa's house for the week. It was my mom, my dad, and me driving all the way to Fairfax, Minnesota. My great grandpa and I went fishing at a lake that I never learned the name of, and we went fishing for catfish. We moved four or five times, and on the sixth spot we caught our first catfish. We were right next to a barbed wire fence and we had already caught three catfish. Then, BAM! The biggest catfish of the day on my line! I fought for five minutes, and then the line snapped. The catfish broke my fifty pound line. It was so sad. I was more than likely pulling in a fish that weighed more than me.

We headed home with six fish and tired souls. It was so much fun just to fight a fish heavier than me. I had a ton of fun that day. Sadly, my great grandpa died in 2019 in a car accident after having a heart attack. If I could do one more thing with him, it would be trying to catch that fish.

POETRY
Grades 7 & 8

Brennen Thooft
Lynd, MN
1st Place

Hoot

Every night as I lie in my bed
I try and close my eyes
And shut the world out of my head
So many thoughts and worries
Whirling round and round
Makes it hard to calm the sound
All the things I've learned, seen, and said
Just keep running through my head
I toss, I turn, still awake
Come on brain, give me a break
I fluff my pillow, throw back my covers
And stare at my wall...
That's when I hear the call
Outside my window I cannot see
Somewhere near he sits in a tree
Singing a melody
With his hoots, he calms me
I lie there quiet and still
And soon my eyes fall nill
Listening to his rhythmic hoots
Helps me rest and recoup
So, thank you Mr. Owl friend
You help bring my restlessness to an end

Kelsey Hinkeldey
Windom, MN
2nd Place

Discombobulating

I love discombobulating people
It's just what I do
It's fun to discombobulate people
When they have no clue
You can discombobulate your homework
Or just let your homework discombobulate you
'Cause discombobulating your homework
Seems like a discombobulating thing to do
Sometimes people are discombobulating
And they might discombobulate you
But life itself is discombobulating
So, there's really nothing you can do
Discombobulating is confusing
And it's not known by many teens
But when I say the word is confusing
That's literally what it means!

**Madeline Prentice
New London, MN
3rd Place**

Six-Word Story

No sheep and
No more lies

FICTION
Grades 7 & 8

Evie Simpson
New London, MN
1st Place

A Dozen Roses

Chapter One

It's been two years since "the accident" (as my therapist lovingly calls it) and I still spend my days jumping at unfamiliar sounds and looking over my shoulder. As I breeze up the sidewalk to my boyfriend's house, I'm glancing at everything. *The bird feeder. A squirrel. The mailbox.* I run up the steps and fumble with the key. I insert it into the keyhole but freeze in the process. I should tell him. I haven't yet because it's been too hard, but now it might help carry the load. Now excited, I twist the key, but the doorknob twists with it. Confused, I bend closer and that's when I notice the tiny scratch marks all along the keyhole. Someone picked the lock.

Maybe it's just me, but I don't pick the lock to my own house. And what is even weirder is that Chad told me that he wouldn't be home yet. That when I got there, I should let myself in and start unpacking. I glance around. No one is there, and there are no suspicious cars or shades peeled back. Whoever picked the lock must have cleared out.

Cautiously, slowly, I turn the doorknob and push the door. Sure enough, the door is unlocked. I'm faced with two options. Either go in and poke around or stay out here and try to see if a neighbor can help me. The only problem with the latter choice is I can't trust anyone anymore. My therapist tells me that I have trust issues, but I prefer to think of it as a minor setback with meeting new people. Before the accident, I was one of the friendliest people you'd meet, but now I can barely trust anyone, and that includes my cat.

Now that my brain has made up its mind, I step forward and walk silently down the hall. I look around for a weapon I can use in case there is someone in the house. Just a few feet away from me is a vase. I could smash that over someone's head if I needed to. Still looking back and forth, I grab the vase off the end table, take a deep breath and move on. Next is the kitchen. Holding the vase up and gripping it tighter, I slowly round the corner and step into the kitchen. I feel the vase slipping as I stare at the floor, and a high-pitched scream pierces the air. I'm not sure, but I think it's me. Because there, on the floor staring blankly at the ceiling, lies my boyfriend, Chad. And possibly worse is the stab wound in his chest, openly bleeding on the floor. It's about the size of a golf ball, and the skin around the wound is raw and black looking. I can see straight through Chad's chest, and I see the edge of a bone. It looks like someone carved out parts of his flesh.

The vase shatters, and I drop to my knees. I crawl forward shuddering as I encounter parts of his warm skin and search for Chad's pulse. He's dead. I rock back and put my head in my hands, sobbing. This can't be real. He isn't dead. He'll pop up and say that it was just a joke. Who could do this? Because I've lost my head, it takes me a second to realize that I can't just sit here and wait for something to happen. I have to call the police. I stumble up to my feet and look around for the home phone. There it is. On the island. I trip forward, still out of control and sobbing, and grab it. Through my blurry eyes I see my shaking bloody fingers flip the phone over and punch in 8-1-1. Wait. That's not the right number. I press cancel and force myself to wipe my eyes and try to calm down. I continue to cry though despite my efforts. This time, I punch in the right number and bring the phone up to my ear. It takes two rings for someone to pick up. "911 what's your emergency?"

A horrible noise comes from my throat. It sounds like a dying animal.

“Are you all right? Could you repeat that?” the woman asks.

“My-m-my boyfriend,” I choke out.

“What’s happened?” asks the lady. “Is he hurting you?”

“No,” I say. “He was—he was—st...stabbed,” I say sobbing, because I haven’t really admitted to him being dead.

“Okay, hon, calm down. Can you tell me where you are? And what your name is?”

I can’t. She can’t know my name. But one look at Chad and I know I will have to try. “My name is... it’s Abigail Porter. I’m at 112 Pine Wood Street,” I say.

“Okay. Please stay calm and stay there. We’ll be there as soon as we can, okay?”

I nod even though she can’t see me and hang up. I sink to the floor and stare at Chad. I honestly do not know what to do now. Do I search the house for the culprit? Do I stay put? I sob. This wasn’t supposed to happen today. Then I think of how he told me he wouldn’t be home yet. Why was he here already? I start as I hear sirens. I stand up, hiccupping and choking, and grab the picture of us off the wall. I know, I know I’m being paranoid, but I can’t trust anyone, and I already told the lady my name. I peek through the window and see two women in suits, and three police officers. Close behind them are a Forensics team and a few medics. They all look legit except the suit people. I’ll have to check to see if they have badges.

While I was hatching a plan the police officers reached the door. “This is the police! Open the door!”

I scramble over and open the door, hiding the picture behind my back as I do. They all march in, and I try my best to stay out of their way. Thankfully, I recognize one of the

detectives from the newspapers, but the other one.... She looks vaguely familiar, but I can't place where I have seen her before. It wasn't the newspaper, that's all I know.

"Where is the victim?" asks the detective who I recognize.

"His name is Chad... he's in the kitchen," I say. I can't bear to look at Chad's body again, so I follow them and resolve by looking around at some stuff I didn't notice before. Like the blood sprayed on the wall, and the knife laying a few feet away from Chad.

As my eyes sweep the area, they land on the counter. I freeze. All the voices are blocked out. Everyone is blurred at the edges except this one thing. Because there, on the counter, looking almost innocent, and extraordinarily beautiful, are a dozen roses. Just blooming. I scream for the second time that day, because I know who those are from. *How? How? How?* The same word rushes through my head, and I feel cold. My palms start to sweat, and the world spins. I think I must have fallen because there are people looking down at me, and a medic rushes forward and crouches by me. "*Are you okay? Are you...*" her voice turns fuzzy. I faint.

Chapter Two

It's about 8:30 at night. There's a light persistent north breeze. I wrap my jacket around me tighter and glance up and down the pier. To the normal civilian, I simply look like I'm waiting for someone. But, really, I'm wired, and carrying a taser. Also, a conceal and carry my parents forced me to take when they learned I would be helping in a police stakeout. "Just keep waiting," Chief's voice fills my head. Along with all my weapons, I also have a hidden wire that not only allows me to hear Chief (who is watching this whole thing from an ice cream truck) but also so Chief can hear what other people are saying.

This whole plan was Jen's idea. She says whoever the killer was, they probably were aiming for me, not Chad. That was a few weeks ago. There's a lot more to a stake out than I originally thought.

Of course, they can't have me actually dying, so Barb is hiding under the pier ready for when our culprit shows up. Then, she'll help me take them down. The breeze picks up, and I shiver. Surprisingly, I'm not in the least bit scared. I know they won't be there. I might get frostbite, sure, but I'll go home, unharmed. That's why I need Chief's warning shouted in my ear to wake up out of the doze I've fallen into. I almost don't see Barb and the figure struggling. I don't notice anything, until it's too late. The world has already begun to tilt, and everything goes black.

When I finally come to, it takes me a second to realize where I am. Even then, I've never seen this place before. It looks to be the size of a one room apartment, but judging by the graffiti on the walls, no one has lived here for a long time. In fact, except for a run-down mattress and a few suits in the corner, the room is completely deserted. I look down and see that someone has very sloppily tied me to the chair I'm sitting in with a wire. I begin to wiggle around, trying to work it loose, but a raspy voice cuts me off.

"Where are we?"

I look around, and there's Barb, a bloody wound on her forehead, looking absolutely horrible, and tied in the same manner as me.

"I really don't know."

As I swing my head around, I suddenly see the suits. I've seen those before, haven't I? And as my brain searches for an answer, I think of Jen. I see the clothes she showed up in at the crime scene and the clothes she wore before we left

for the pier. I think of how she looks vaguely familiar, and the way she had suspiciously disappeared right when I was taking my spot on the pier.

“I don’t believe it!” I say quietly.

“What? Did you find a way out?” Barb asks still wiggling in her chair.

“No. I think I figured out who did this... I’m not sure. Just keep trying to get out of the chair,” I said, wiggling around myself.

“Well, I must say, Abigail. You fought and you fought hard! I almost couldn’t find out where you moved to, and I was even about to give up! Then I got a very nice email tipping me off about your whereabouts and of course I came here right away.”

“Who is that? Who’s speaking?” I say into the darkness. The voice raises hair on my neck and sends an unwanted shiver down my spine.

“Oh, don’t play dumb! Honey, you know me! Right? I mean I just sat here and watched you figure out who was responsible for poor Chad’s death.” The person’s voice gets all babyish and mockingly sad. “He really didn’t have to die. It’s a shame isn’t it!”

“Jen?” I say, my eyes still sweeping the darkness.

“Good job! You guessed right! Good work really; it wasn’t obvious at *all*. I mean I thought you saw how I just wanted to strangle you the first time I saw you, but I guess you didn’t because you fell right into my lap!” Jen says all of this in a high-pitched tone, with excitement in her voice.

“Now hold on one second!” Barb barks. “You’re telling me that you, Jen Walter, planted all that evidence, even suggested this whole plan for gosh sake, and killed Chad?! I’m sorry, but I don’t believe this lie. Jen was trying really hard to find Tom, our *actual* killer.”

I hear footsteps, slow and menacing, walking toward me.

“You don’t believe it? Well, how’s this for evidence!” Jen steps into the now fading light and stares Barb down.

Barb’s mouth drops and she stares right back. “You did this? I trusted you, Jen! I put my life in your hands!”

“Oh, trust me, *you* at least were never supposed to get hurt. In fact, you weren’t supposed to be here at all. I had no idea you were waiting under the pier for me. Then you rushed at me like a banshee and I had no choice but to hit you over the head. I didn’t even realize it was my trusted colleague until I hauled you up and brought you here.”

“You had choices, Jen. You could’ve chosen not to do this at all! And also, just-just *why??* I mean I barely know Abigail, and I seem to know better than you that she did nothing to hurt anyone!” Barb growls.

Jen sighs. “Oh Barb, I really wish that was true! JUST KIDDING!!! If it had never happened, and she really hadn’t hurt anyone, I wouldn’t have been able to have all this fun with you two!”

“Excuse me for interrupting, but last time I checked I didn’t do *anything*,” I interject.

“You know what’s really sad Abigail is that I really do believe that you have no idea what happened. And the fact that you hurt him *so much* and still don’t know! And he cried for days about it too. Well, I guess I better tell you! Oh, this is so much fun!” she squeals and heads back into the darkness then comes back with a chair.

“It all started when you and he first started to date. Boy, let me tell you I was so jealous! We had dated previously, and I fell in love, but he didn’t feel the same way about it. So, you two were crazy about each other and I just had to deal with it. But I think you’ve figured out by now that I’m not the kind of person who just gives up on anything! We

were perfect for each other; he just had to see it. So, I hatched a plan. Let me say that this was genius on my part because who else would've thought of this at all?!? I started to give you little calls and texts that were to sound like they were coming from Tom. Then you would get scared and break up with him and hopefully go jump off a cliff or something. And it worked! You moved away, and now all I had to do was convince him that I was the one, not you.

“But when I told him what I did, instead of rejoicing he pushed me away. Well, I guess you had truly made him happy, and he couldn't see what he had done. I began to loathe you and hate you for getting scared and running away. I was also mad at myself for making you go. For several weeks I watched as he started to lose interest in different activities and spend more time on the top floor of the school library crying in between bookshelves. Eventually I had enough. So, I contacted a friend of mine, and he managed to track you down for me. I moved here, killed a detective by the name of Jen and took her place. I just had to find you. Well, I did, and for a few days I watched you. I had planned to come forward and admit to you that it wasn't Tom who had sent those threatening texts and calls. But I saw almost instantly that you have already moved on. A different guy, a different relationship that you could screw up and someone else that you could ruin. Well, I wanted you back for Tom, so I decided to get Chad out of the way for you. Don't worry he barely screamed. In fact, now that I think of it, even though I took the time to make a jack-o'-lantern out of him I think he died pretty quickly.”

I can't speak. I don't know what's worse. The fact that she did all of this behind our backs or that she really seems to be enjoying herself.

“And yet for some reason I can't figure out, you still didn't go running back to Tom. I think maybe I ruined it for

you two, but, eh, whatever, right?” She smiles and stands up. She walks over to a table by the mattress where a bag is laying. All over the bag is a dark red stain. Blood.

“Well, I hate you, and I hate myself, and I hate the world, so I’m going to end it here for the both of us. Don’t worry, it won’t hurt,” she stops in the process of pulling a long, jagged knife from the bag that had blood all over the handle and knife itself. “Ah heck with it. I’ll tell the truth for once. It will hurt. I’m going to make sure of that.”

She turns around and steps towards me with the knife raised. I start to wiggle and squirm against the wire that restricts me. She quickens her pace, and before I know it, she’s on me. I look up at her, and I know the fear must show on my face because she grins and says, “At least you get to see Chad,” right before she plunges the knife into my chest and twists. Pain. I can’t even begin to describe it. It burns and stings and throbs, and I feel my blood run down my stomach. I’m screaming and so is Barb. The door bursts open, and in runs Chief way too late because I can already, just like that first day, feel myself falling. The last thing I see before lights out is Jen, laughing like a maniac and plunging the knife again and again into her chest.

It has been two weeks since the death of Abigail Porter. A memorial was set up for her at the police station and she was buried five days ago. Every day since then, I leave her favorite flowers on her grave. Roses. When I heard of her death, I immediately broke down because in a way, I’m the one who brought this on her. My therapist and the police office try to explain that I had nothing to do with this, but I don’t listen. They wouldn’t get it anyway. When this becomes obvious to my therapist, he stops trying to explain. Instead, he just asks, “What is it that you’ve learned from

this horrible experience? Because, as I've said before, Tom, it isn't about what happened. It's about what you get from this."

It gets harder and harder to answer him, but every day I just say, "It's hard to say goodbye." ~Tom Cousins

Keira DeBoer
Edgerton, MN
2nd Place

Life before Death

Death, what a strange thing. We all think about it at one point or another in our lives, but we never truly understand it. Everybody is scared of something. I'm scared of death.

I didn't deserve what happened to me. I had my life all planned out, but one, tiny, little thing ruined it all for me. You see, I had a pretty normal life up until freshman year. I had an amazing family. I was a twin, and she was my best friend. My parents named us Amara and Bella. My sister, Amara, was the best person I have ever known. I didn't know if I could live without her, or even breathe without her for that matter. I loved her. She always cheered me up when I was sad, or comforted me when I was scared. My life was amazing, but that was all before the worst day of my life.

"Amara, you know you're not supposed to drive the car. Mom and Dad would kill you if they knew you took it," I said annoyed.

"Well then, it's a good thing Mom and Dad aren't home," answered Amara sarcastically. "Well, are you coming or not?"

I hopped in the car, and we started cruising around the lake. We drove to our favorite spot and parked perpendicular with the front of the car facing the side of the bridge and the back of the car on the other side of the bridge. Nobody ever came over the bridge, so we thought we were okay. We sat in the car and just stared at the lake. We watched the sun shimmer off the water and it was peaceful.

“Where could you ever get a view like this?” asked Amara, still staring at the water. “A lot of places,” I said as I started laughing.

Amara chuckled and closed her eyes. She couldn’t think of anything better. “We better get going. Mom and Dad will be home soon,” I said in a weary voice.

“Fine,” Amara said sadly.

As she put the car in reverse she didn’t check behind her. A pick-up truck came out of nowhere and rammed into the driver’s side of the car. The airbag came shooting out and nailed me right in the face. I was shocked and couldn’t move. The wind was knocked out of me and the glass shattered against my face. I couldn’t breathe or speak. After a while I gathered my voice.

“Amara are you all right?” I said in a tired voice. “Amara, come on, get up. Wake up please. Amara you need to get up,” I said shouting at her now. I couldn’t take it. I started violently shaking her. Soon, I was yelling, screaming at her to wake up. She needed to wake up. I couldn’t live without her. I finally couldn’t take it anymore, and I passed out.

I awoke with the hospital light shining in my eyes.

“Oh, thank goodness you’re okay Bella,” said my mom hugging me and kissing my forehead.

“What happened? Where is Amara,” I said confused.

Unexpectedly, my mom burst into tears, and I remembered immediately what had happened. I cried alongside my mom, and I felt like my life was ending. Then the doctor came in and started to speak to my mom and me.

“I am very sorry for your loss. I will give you a little bit of time, but I will need to come in later and talk about the incident,” said Dr. Mills. He then left the room.

In about three hours Dr. Mills came back into the room.

“My name is Dr. Mills and I will be treating you for a couple of days. Thankfully you will be okay, considering the pick-up hit the driver’s side of the car. You are very lucky you survived. You did suffer some serious trauma to your head from the airbag, but you’ll heal quickly. You fractured your leg smashing it against the dashboard. Other than that, and some other minor bruises and scratches from the glass, you’ll be ready to leave in a couple of days.

“What happened to her?” I asked frustrated. I didn’t want to speak anymore, but I needed to know.

“The car rammed into her left side and she hit her head on the steering wheel due to the force of the crash. She was knocked unconscious, and she bled out from all the cuts from the glass. She didn’t feel any pain after she was knocked out. I am really sorry, but we tried everything we could. We weren’t able to save her. She had passed by the time we reached the accident,” replied Dr. Mills.

Dr. Mills left the room, and I continued to cry. I tried to process it all, but it was too much for me. I just layed down and tried to go to sleep. The next morning Dr. Mills woke me up to take my medication, but I didn’t want to wake up. I was having a much better time asleep.

Dr. Mills checked on me every day and gave me my daily medication. I didn’t speak the rest of the time I was at the hospital. After four days we left and headed back home.

About eleven weeks passed. Our family fell apart in those eleven weeks. My dad and mom fought all the time. Usually they argued about me, and what they should do with me. My mom wanted me to go to a therapist and get treated. My dad wanted me to stay home and heal on my own. I think my dad just didn’t want to pay the bills. Personally, I didn’t care anymore anyways. I couldn’t think about anything else.

Soon enough my parents split up, and I decided to stay with my mom. We had to move and pack up everything. We

stayed in the same town, but we had to get a different house across town. I had to go to a completely different school. School would start in one week and my mom thought it would be good for me to get out and go to school. I hated school before, and I knew it would be so much worse this year. My first year of high school, and I would already be known as the girl with the dead sister.

The first day of school arrived, and I despised it. I didn't know anybody in any of my classes, and when I was walking down the hall kids would whisper and gossip about me.

"Isn't that the girl with the dead sister," they would say, or, "I heard that her parents split after her sister died."

Nobody really understands what it felt like. How horrible it was. Soon, it wasn't just gossiping behind my back. Kids would say it to my face and joke about Amara. It was usually the same guy named Jackson. He had a "gang" with him all the time, and you could say, was "the popular kid." Girls obsessed over him, and I didn't get it. He was a jerk and always got into fights. I hated him more than anything, but I couldn't do anything about him. I was hopeless.

One day he approached me in the hallway.

"Hey, how's your sister doing? Oh, wait, never mind, she's dead," said Jackson in a mocking voice. "Sorry, I forgot. Well, how are your parents doing? Are they still happy together?"

I never talked in school so people were pretty shocked when they heard what I said. "How's your girlfriend doing? Are you guys still together? Oh wait, never mind, she left you. Well, how is your dad doing? Is he still with you or did he leave like your mom did? Funny how everyone in your life seems to leave you. Is that their fault or yours?" I said talking back to him. Soon a crowd of students circled around

us. The second I said it, everybody knew what was going to happen.

“I heard that it was all your fault, the crash. You didn’t stop her from driving the car. It was all your fault. You’re the reason your sister’s dead. You’re the reason she couldn’t have a life. You should have been the one that died. Your parents would still be together if it had been you. Everything that happened is all your fault.”

Now when I say that angered me, I mean that *angered* me. I was so mad I didn’t have a care in the world. I hated him so much, and I couldn’t take him anymore. He got what he wanted. I finally snapped, and I was angry. I knew I didn’t have the upper hand, but I didn’t care. So I did what any sane person would. I punched him. I punched him as hard as I possibly could right in the nose. I was still so angry, so I let out all the anger I had been hiding inside me, out on him. I continued to kick him and punch him until a teacher had to come and grab me. He dragged me to the office and called my mom.

It turns out Jackson had a broken nose after that and bruises all over his body for the next two weeks. I got suspended from school for one week. I didn’t even care about getting suspended or that I had hurt him. When I had to stay home, my mom still had to go to work. I was all alone, and I could do whatever I wanted. I didn’t do what most kids would do when home from school though. I couldn’t stop thinking about what Jackson had said. I thought about this when I was in the hospital. I knew deep down it was my fault. Everything he said was true. I should have been the one that died that day. She should have been the one that lived. I felt so guilty I needed to feel pain, too. I went to the kitchen and took a knife out of the drawer. I went to my bathroom and started to cut. I made six small cuts on my arms and made five cuts on my legs. I knew I deserved it.

I knew my mom wouldn't notice. They also blended in with all the scars from the accident, but I still wore sweats and a hoodie to cover them up.

Then I started getting made fun of even more. I wasn't a small kid. I was bullied for my weight, so I took the way I thought was easiest. I started to starve myself. I ate in front of my mom, but I threw it up right after when I went upstairs. I soon began to get very sick and dizzy. I told my mom it was nothing, but she took me to the doctor anyway.

She finally took me to Dr. Mills. He diagnosed me with depression and anorexia. My mom was shocked and couldn't believe it. Her daughter, her beautiful daughter, turned into a mess within the span of weeks, days even.

We walked to the car and I sat in the back, knowing I wouldn't be able to look at her, and she wouldn't want to look at me.

"Why didn't you tell me? I could have helped you," my mom said crying.

I didn't say anything to her. I could see she wasn't really looking for an answer. I stared out the window and began thinking. What would happen if I was gone? If I wasn't here anymore. I wouldn't feel any more pain, and it would be peaceful.

The next week I thought life would get better. My doctor gave me anti depression medication, and my teachers and Mom were told to make sure I was eating my food. Things finally started looking up.

The next night I was online. I was looking at some of my old posts. I found a picture of my sister and I standing on a beach. Then I saw the comments. They were saying horrible things about me and that wasn't the worst part. A bunch of people reposted it and wrote as the caption, "I wonder how you could ever live with yourself knowing that you had killed your sister. That nobody wanted you. You

were all alone with no one caring. That would suck, wouldn't it?" That was Jackson's revenge. He texted everyone he could telling them to say those horrible things to get back at me. I started crying and ran outside. I hated myself. I absolutely hated myself, and they were right; nobody cared.

I ran to the bridge where my sister had died. I climbed on the top rail above the rocks. I thought there was no better place to die. After all, it was me who should have died. I knew this was the only way to stop the pain. I would finally be at peace. Staring at the rocks below, I had made my decision. My final decision. I had ended my life.

You may wonder the full reason why I did it. I just wanted it to stop. All of my pain was just building up. I'm not a bad person for the ways I tried to kill my sadness. I didn't die by suicide; my pain had killed me. If that was how my life was going to be, I didn't want it. I didn't know why I had to stay alive if I would forever be sad. Nobody was telling me to keep breathing anyway. They kept telling me that life goes on, but to me that was the saddest part. After all, what's the point of living if you end up dying in the end? No one makes it out of here alive, so why not end mine now? I was alone, completely alone. I was silent, with no one around to help me. So don't tell me I was wrong to take my own life. For I was all alone and death gave me peace.

Very good story and a lesson for all of us. Sadly, this—or similar situations—happens more than we would like to believe.

Claire Safranski
Eden Prairie, MN
3rd Place

Asylum

SUNDAY

“Peyton, wait up!”

Peyton jogged along the colorful, green woods toward the stream.

“I didn’t know the thing you wanted to show me was *this* important...,” Jeremy said.

“Well, once you see it, you’ll understand why it’s so miraculous,” Peyton said as they both knelt down by the cold stream, excitement twinkling in their eyes.

“Look!” she exclaimed. Peyton pointed to a long, silver fish swimming downstream. Jeremy watched as the elegant fish glided past them.

“Whoa, there hasn’t been fish in here for years. Do you know how they got here?”

“No clue, but however they did is a miracle.”

They sat in silence as they watched the beautiful fish swim down the stream.

Jeremy jumped when his phone suddenly started ringing. “Oh, hey Morn,” he answered.

“Way to ruin the moment,” Peyton whispered.

Jeremy rolled his eyes with a smirk on his face. “Dinner? Alright, I’ll be there soon, and I’ll ask her.” After Jeremy hung up, he said, “My mom made dinner, and she asked if you want to join us. It’s pizza night.” He stood up waiting for her reply.

“Why not?” Peyton said. “You know how much I love pizza.”

The two walked together along the forest making their way into the small town they lived in called Autumn Brooke—squeezed right between the Rocky Mountains. Watching the sun sink beneath the trees, a white piece of paper drifted through the canopy of leaves, landing a few yards off the trail.

“Keep going,” she said distractedly. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

Jeremy nodded and headed towards town as Peyton stepped into the underbrush. She bent down to see small, scribbled words spread across the note. It said:

If you find me, you are now cursed. For each day, it gets worse and worse. Every 18th hour, it strikes, leaving you with no hope in sight.



“How was the stream?” Jeremy’s mom asked as Peyton loaded her plate with cheese pizza.

“It was awesome, Mrs. Elias. Did you know the fish are back?”

Mrs. Elias looked at Peyton in astonishment. “Incredible. Do you remember how they all disappeared?”

Peyton thought of the rumors about what happened to the fish, but the one that scared her the most stuck out.

“People have said that all the fish went mental, ate each other, and eventually wiped each other all out. Seems a little farfetched, don’t you think?”

“A little.” Mrs. Elias laughed and headed upstairs.

“So, what’d you find at that tree when you told me to walk ahead?” asked Jeremy.

Peyton pulled out the odd note she had taken from the tree and handed it to him. While reading the note, Jeremy’s

face scrunched up in confusion. “What the heck does that mean?” he asked.

All of a sudden, a buzzing sensation filled Peyton’s mind as she thought, *this boy is such an idiot, why do I bother showing him anything?* She sighed and yelled, “Never mind.” She ripped the note from his hands and stalked towards the door.

Jeremy glanced up, startled. “Peyton! Wait, what did I d— Why are you being like this?” he stammered as he raced after her.

Filled with anger, Peyton walked into the cold air hoping to get away from Jeremy as quick as possible. *I never want to see Jeremy again!* Peyton thought in rage. Leaving Jeremy in the frigid night, she heard, “C’mon, Peyton! What did I do wrong?”

MONDAY

Peyton awoke the next morning in her warn bed with a horrific headache. “What am I doing here?” she said out loud. It felt like a second ago she was back at Jeremy’s house, eating pizza, and talking about something, but she couldn’t remember what. She opened the shades, and sunlight flooded her room. Pain shot through her head from staring into the blinding light. *Shoot, what time is it?*

“PEYTON! Are you up?” Her mother knocked on the door before swinging it open. At the sight of Peyton still in her reindeer pajamas, her expression shifted. “What are you doing? We have to leave in 10-minutes for school!”

Instead of replying, Peyton scrambled to grab her school clothes and her backpack.

“Meet me in the car soon; otherwise, you’re going to be late!” her mother said, rushing out of Peyton’s room.

After putting on her wrinkled clothes, grabbing her backpack, and slipping her coat on, she ran to the car. They left the driveway and headed to the middle school.

Slowing to a stop in front of the school doors, Peyton's mother said goodbye and sped off. Reaching the school doors, Peyton felt something fall out of her coat pocket. She looked down to see the piece of paper lingering on the cement. "How'd you get there?" she said in a whisper. Putting the note she found near the stream back in her pocket, she headed into school.



RINGG. "Alright everyone! That's it for class today, and I will see you tomorrow."

Finally, lunch, Peyton thought. Making her way to the lunchroom her stomach growled in anger. Loud sounds of talking and laughter streamed out of the cafeteria with excited teenagers dying for something to eat. Gazing around the room, she laid her eyes upon Jeremy sitting with two other girls at the usual table. Peyton made her way over to the three with her food-filled lunch tray in hand.

"Hey Jeremy, Eloise, and Bella! How's it going?" Peyton said as she sat down next to Bella.

"Fine." The girls said in unison.

Peyton tried to make eye contact with Jeremy, but he wouldn't bring his eyes up to look at her. About to reach for her fork, a tall boy knocked into her when passing by.

"Sorry," he mouthed making his way over to another table.

Suddenly, a buzzing feeling poured into her head making her feel dizzy. Rage and feelings of hatred crowded Peyton's mind with the repeating thought running through

like a movie. *I'm going to kill that kid.* Stomping over to the boy, she raised her fist and punched him square in the jaw.



In the principal's office, several teachers were yelling. They were talking all at once, and Peyton could only catch onto bits of sentences like, "What were you thinking?" and "You're going to receive a serious consequence."

"Everyone!" yelled Mrs. Flores, Autumn Brooke Middle School's principal. "As angry and upset as you all are, we have to rationally decide a punishment for Miss Clarke. Isn't that right?" Mrs. Flores said while raising an eyebrow towards Peyton. Crazy thoughts rushed into Peyton's mind. Why was she in the principal's office? What did she do? Where is everyone else? The last thing that Peyton remembered was eating lunch with Bella, Eloise, and Jeremy. She remembered that Jeremy wasn't making eye contact with her, and that she felt mad, extremely mad.

A strong voice interrupted her thoughts. "Miss Clarke, you will be suspended for one day," Mrs. Flores declared.

"Suspension? Why? What did I do?" Peyton exclaimed. "You know what you did, young lady. Don't play dumb."

Before she could say anything else, Mr. Kinsley, her 8th grade writing teacher, said, "Your mother is already on her way to pick you up; it is best just to leave it at that."

After a prolonged ten minutes, Peyton sulked down to the front doors, fearing what her mother would say when she would see her. Surprisingly, her mother didn't say anything when she saw her, even throughout the car ride back home. Peyton stepped out of the car, and started to make her way to her room when her mother said with a stern look, "Peyton, you're not leaving this house for the rest of the week except for school after your suspension."



BZZZ. BZZZ. Peyton awoke from her nap after getting home. She picked up her phone to see Jeremy calling her after they would've gotten out of school. Yawning, Peyton said, "Hey, Jeremy."

Wasting no time on small talk, he said, "Peyton, what is going on? First, you yell at me for asking about the note you found, and then you punch a kid in the jaw for bumping into you. And now you're suspended! What is going through your head?"

Peyton's mind went blank. She never remembered yelling at him or punching a kid in the face. Is that the reason why Jeremy wouldn't make eye contact with her at lunch—because he was angry with her? Was she suspended because she punched someone?

A gentle voice interrupted her thoughts. "Peyton, you know you can tell me anything. We've been best friends for six years."

Peyton smiled even though she knew that Jeremy couldn't see it. He was a good friend. She explained to Jeremy the two times when her mind went blank: during dinner with him and at lunch. It was almost as if she went to sleep for a minute then would wake up somewhere new but with no memory of what occurred previously.

"So ... your first 'psychotic break' was last night?"

"Yes, after I found the piece of paper on the way back from the stream, and the second time happened at lunch today."

The phone fell silent for about a minute then Jeremy said, "Those two times were about 17 or 18 hours apart, and guessing that it would be at a continuous time frame that means that it will happen again at ten in the morning tomorrow."

The two continued to talk for an hour, planning what to do the next time it would happen, and if something could possibly be triggering it. Peyton played with her hair, stressed about the next morning.

“Alright, so the plan is that you will come over tomorrow at nine a.m. and wait out with me until it’s over. Wait, but what about school?” Peyton asked.

“Oh right, I’ll tell my mom that you need emotional support after what happened today. She’ll be totally down with it since she is a physiatrist.”

Peyton said goodbye and went down for dinner.

TUESDAY

Peyton awoke to a loud banging on the front door.

“I’m coming!” Peyton’s mother said from downstairs. Peyton heard two people talking then someone running up the stairs.

“Peyton! It’s 9:30 already. Why aren’t you up? I tried calling like ten times.” Jeremy rushed in and shut the door with concern spread across his face. Peyton picked up her phone to see several missed calls from Jeremy and many worried texts asking if she was up.

Peyton said, “Sorry. I slept in I guess. Thanks for coming, though.”

After getting ready, Jeremy and Peyton sat on the floor across the room from each other, waiting for the moment to strike.

“9:40,” Jeremy whispered as he checked his phone. The minutes seemed to take hours to go by, and once it was 9:55, Peyton could feel her heart beating hard against her chest. “If you do anything absurdly insane, I promise that I won’t hate you.”

Peyton smiled, for it made her feel so much better about this situation. Jeremy smiled back with hope gleaming in his eyes.

The perfect moment was ruined when a buzzing sensation entered her mind. Instead of having her own thoughts, it seemed like something in her head was talking to her. *You don't matter, Peyton. No one loves you or cares about you. They want nothing to do with you.* Peyton didn't want to believe it, but she knew it was true. After punching a boy, she was sure her mother was ashamed and furious. Why would she still love her?

Grab the scissors on your desk. C'mon, I'll be with you the whole time.

As she looked at the scissors, her mind went blank only listening to that one command. Slowly she picked up the scissors, and the last thing she heard was Jeremy yelling before everything went black.



Ambulance sirens filled her mind as she awoke on a stretcher heading to hospital doors. She looked around her to see her mother's terrified face. "AAHHHH!" Peyton moaned in pain as she looked down at her bandaged, bloody wrists.

The voice returned saying, *yes, yes, perfect! Now your mother won't have to deal with your insanity.* Peyton flailed, kicked, and screamed bloody murder. The nurse bringing her inside said on the walkie-talkie, "We have an attempt in suicide; we're bringing her into room 107."

"Copy that," another voice responded.

You haven't finished your task. Find something sharp, so you can end it. Peyton looked around and tried grabbing a scalpel on a cart that passed by. Once she got to the hospital

room, she was forcibly put onto a hospital bed and had restraints tightened on her arms and legs.

“NO!” Peyton screamed, “GET ME OUT OF HERE!” Continuing to follow the voice’s orders, she banged her head multiple times against the bed frame hoping she would die. She looked down to feel a needle being poked into her vein, and everything went dark.



Peyton awoke to a white room with padded walls and floors.

“Oh no,” she cried. “What did I do?”

Her head throbbed in pain, and her wrists’ were unbearable. She looked down to see clean, white bandages wrapped around her stitched up wrists. She began to cry. Every day this curse got worse, but she wasn’t giving up now. Even without Jeremy, she still had to figure out what the cause of this was. She began replaying the past days. Punching and yelling filled her mind, but then her thoughts landed back to the stream when she had seen the fish with Jeremy and what a glorious moment it was. *Wait, the note*, Peyton thought. She began repeating the words written on it. *Every 18th hour*, Peyton thought.

“Oh my gosh. Why didn’t I think of that?”

Peyton yelled aloud in frustration. The note had been there the whole time, watching her, *warning* her. *When I picked it up*, Peyton thought, *I must’ve immediately been cursed with this mind-altering reality*. She remembered the last words on the note, the hairs on the back on her neck rising. The words...*leaving you no hope in sight....*

Her thoughts were interrupted when the door of the padded room opened. Her mother with tears streaming down her face ran to Peyton and tightly hugged her. Peyton knew

she had to get out of here, so she and Jeremy could figure out a way to end this.

“Mom! I need to see Jeremy now,” Peyton sobbed. Her mother squeezed her tighter. “Shh,” she whispered into her ear. “Peyton, you’re mentally unstable, and you’re d-dangerous. So, we’re going to move you to a place where nice people will help you.”

“How long, Mom?”

“A few months. As long as it takes.”

After her mother told Peyton she loved her, she sat alone in the padded room until the nurses came to transport her. She wouldn’t last a month in that facility. Each day, she would get worse.

There was no hope for her. Peyton knew her life had ended right when she touched the note.

Nonfiction
Grades 7 & 8

Mazzi Moore
Hills, MN
1st Place

One Moment Can Pave Your Future

Occasionally we get inspiration from the unlikeliest places, and this stimulating experience was no exception. My family and I were visiting my grandparents on the East Coast, and we were planning on meeting for supper one evening. I had been exploring their home when a pit of dread filled my stomach. My grandma had been taking a long time getting ready, so I notified my mother, and she rushed down the hall to check on her.

The rest of the evening was a blur. My grandmother's hip had given out, and she'd fallen, hitting her head on an ornate chair. As the ambulance arrived, I knew that I needed to stay calm and be an example for my younger sister. Thankfully, the paramedics were efficient, and quickly my grandma was whisked away to the hospital.

After our family arrived at the emergency room, the panic settled and long hours passed. My parents discussed among themselves and decided that my mother, sister, and I would Uber back to our hotel 50 miles away in Baltimore, allowing my father to bring my grandparents back to their house once my grandmother was released.

As the car pulled into the desolate parking lot, all I could fathom was laying down in my hotel bed and falling into a deep sleep. My sister and I clambered into the backseat, squished between a car seat and a bowl of potato chips, but I couldn't care less. I was considering closing my eyes and taking a little nap, but my mother started explaining our predicament to the driver. Suddenly, after dropping my eyelids, I realized that the lady was describing her son, who

had been born with a fatal heart condition. Most little girls would've drifted off, but I was captivated by the story. While we drove, she described how her son had been hospitalized at birth with multiple holes in his heart.

As the car zoomed along the Maryland highway, something changed inside of me. Hearing the woman talk about her son's many surgeries, pride oozing out of her, I knew then and there that I had a purpose in life. I was going to help people—make a positive impact on their lives. This single conversation has been an inspiration unlike any other in my life, and I knew that through hard work and determination, I could achieve my goal.

I never would have thought that a conversation in a car would have such an impact on my goals and desires. The experience I had on that spring night focused my plans for the future. I decided that I wanted to provide myself with more exposure to the medical field. This included seeking out camps and special experiences, understanding how the human body works, and becoming a more active member in my community. This hidden opportunity has opened otherwise closed paths in my life and encouraged me to continue to absorb information, empathize leadership, and make my own way in the world.

POETRY
Grades 9 & 10

Eavan Bobbe
Willmar, MN
1st Place

Her Warmth

Lying in the sun my bare shoulders are caressed by
her warmth falling gently over me.
I'm a child wrapped in her mother's embrace.
Cool air meets my shoulders as she loosens her hold.
She lowers gently to her bed.
"Sleep well," I say to her.

Her sister awakens in the sky,
wraps her hands around my throat.
The darkness descends cloaked in her misery.
The night swallows me whole.

The terror of being consumed washes over me
and freezes in my veins.
I keep breathing.
(Somehow I always keep breathing)
I slowly crack my limbs free from their icy constraints
Strip down.
Dive into the pond.

Submerged in water I am free of all thoughts for a moment
until it all rushes back into my brain.
And I am devoured yet again.
The water which once felt cool now coats my skin in slime.
My lungs pull me to the surface,
but there is no surface to be found.
I push against the ice as air escapes past my lips.
I am trapped and there is no escape.

I come to,
thrashing in only inches of water,
cradled in the arms of someone familiar and bright.
A mellow voice lilts, "Sleep well."
I know the cycle will continue,
but for now my mind is given permission to rest.
I am safe in her warmth.

Eavan Bobbe
Willmar, MN
2nd Place

Rain

When my head starts to cloud
and the droplets form
When the sun disappears
I am left with a storm.

With pressure so immense
it crushes me flat
leaves me stumbling and crying
and soaking wet

So I harden myself,
I laugh off the pain,
because if the mountain on my back
increases by even a drop—

I
 will
 fall.

Then it rains.

I break down.

It's not the big things.
Not the huge things
That destroy us.
It's the last straw.
It's the drop of rain.
The moment when you are broken
and with one tap you break.

An island can sink.
A continent can crack.
A planet can explode.
I can implode.

The shield I've made,
forged in pain,
cannot be cracked with a diamond,
only with rain.

Jocelyn Schlenner
Marshall, MN
3rd Place

Mother Nature

Dance in the silver light and count the stars with me,
my moon drunken child.

Sing with the trees and to the creek, my daydreaming child.

Play with the wind and befriend the moon for me, strong one.
Speak with the flowers and fluff the clouds, quiet one.

But look for stones, and know the sky is endless,
my moon drunken child.
Be cautious of the tunes you sing, some are not as forgiving,
my daydreaming child.

Listen to the moon, but distrust the wind, strong one.
Leave your inhibitions, but do not trust the clouds,
for they hide secrets, quiet one.

Now go forth my children, for I have taught all I know.
Return to the wild, spread my teachings, and be free.

FICTION
Grades 9 & 10

Mercedes Myers
Jeffers, MN
1st Place

Hidden

I wake up with a killer headache. *Not again.* Nowadays I feel like I have one every day. My eyes travel over to my alarm clock and I see that it is only 4:00 a.m. I might as well get a workout in before school. I start with jumping jacks, but I notice that my feet are really loud. *Ohh no, that means I weigh too much. I'm going to have to work out more today. Maybe I'll add fifty more sit-ups.* Once I get a good workout in, I check to see that it is six o'clock—time to get ready for school. I decide that I need to shower due to the fact that I reek. I try to avoid bathrooms because you have to see yourself and that is one thing that I hate to do. Every time I look it just reminds me that I'm fat. Today I got a good look at myself. I see my big hips, my fat rolls on my stomach, and my huge thighs. Everything is wrong with me. I step onto my scale: 130 pounds. *This can't be happening. That is way too much.* I almost break down, but I don't have time for that today. It's the first day of school.

Suddenly I hear a loud bang from the kitchen. I quickly put on sweats and a sweatshirt and head down where I see mom picking up all the pans that must've fallen.

“What happened?” I ask.

She quickly just shakes her head and says, “Come help me please.”

I bend down and start to pick up all the pans.

When we finish, Mom asks, “Are you excited for your first day of junior year?”

I just shake my head and say, “Why would I be?” I then look down and see the time. *Ohh crap, I'm late.*

My mom tries to give me a hug before I leave, but I push her away. I don't want her to feel how fat I am. I rush out the door, and as I'm closing it, she yells, "I love you!"

"I love you too," I say quietly.

I am glad I'm a little late. This way I don't have to make an excuse as to why I can't eat breakfast. Not eating at home is pretty easy. Mom usually leaves for work before I wake up and she comes home after I go to sleep. The only reason I saw her today was because she wanted to see me on the first day of school. With Dad, he's a pilot so he's always gone.

I pull into the parking lot at Roseberry High School. We moved here two years ago from Seattle. Wow, was it a change. Seattle had 750,000 people and this town has a grand total of 10,000. I know, what a place. It's funny; I've been here for two years, and I haven't made one friend. How nice. It's actually fine, though, because I'm the kind of person who likes to observe from the outside, not actually be involved. Plus, it makes it easier to keep my secret.

I think the last time I had a meal with more than 100 calories was more than four months ago. *I'm so proud of myself.* Nobody knows that I don't eat. I do a really good job of hiding it. During lunch I paint in the art room, and at dinner nobody's home, so I just lie and say I ate. See, simple. The only part I hate about it is I always get dizzy. I feel like I can never see straight, but it's so worth it if I can lose just a few more pounds.

I get out of my car and head into the old building that is my high school. I grab my schedule out of my backpack and look at it. Math first hour. *Great.* I stop at my locker and put my bag into it, then head off to the classroom. I check to see if Chloe is here, but to my relief I don't see her. Chloe and her minions, Rebecca and Olivia, are the most popular girls in school, but also the meanest. I think I cried every day last year because of them. They always had something mean to

say to me, whether it was about my clothes, or my body, or even my grades. They thought I was a fat nerd. Believe me, I am fat, but I'm not a nerd. I actually struggle in school. They just never care enough to notice it.

I turn around and start to head to my class, but just by my luck I see Chloe and her minions heading my way. Great. I put my head down and try to keep walking, but they stop right in front of me.

“Hey fatty, what, did you eat a lion for breakfast?” Her minions giggle at this comment. It wasn't even that funny. Chloe looks me up and down and remarks “Nice sweatpants. Couldn't fit into the jeans?” Again her minions laugh. They will literally do whatever she says.

I mumble “Leave me alone.”

“Sorry I couldn't hear you with all that blubber,” she retorts.

With that, I run the other direction right into the girls' bathroom. I break down and cry for a while. I don't understand why they can't leave me alone. They were the ones who made me feel insecure in the first place. I used to never care about what I ate or how much I exercised, but ever since they started bullying me, I can't get it out of my head that I'm fat. I decide that when I calm down I will eventually have to go to class.

When I leave the bathroom, I am already ten minutes late. I make my way to the classroom and try to sneak in, but the teacher, Mrs. Brown, sees me and asks, “Where have you been? Class started fifteen minutes ago.” I want to correct her and say ten, but instead I just shrug and say, “Sorry, girl problems.” She lets it go after that and continues her lesson.

The rest of the morning went pretty fast and now I'm in the art room painting. Everyone else is eating, but I can't even stand to look at food. I decide that today I'm going to paint what I feel. I start with some black, then red, then some

brown and so on. When I'm painting, I feel like I can really express myself. Whether that's anger, or sadness, or worry. I take my emotions out on the canvas, and when I'm done I feel a little better. Today I feel chaotic. My life is a mess and it's changing so quickly. When I finally feel like it is finished, I step back and look at the work. The colors are scattered all over the canvas. There are streaks everywhere and it's a very dark and depressing piece.

While I'm analyzing my art I don't even notice that Mr. Williams comes up beside me and looks at the piece, too. He taps me on the shoulder and startles me.

"Sorry," he says, "but your piece is amazing. There is so much emotion in it."

"You don't need to lie to me. I know it's awful."

Mr. Williams shakes his head and says "No, it really is incredible. I actually want to show you something." He walks me over to his desk. On it is a piece of paper with the words "Art Contest" on the top. "Winner gets a 1,000 dollar scholarship."

I just look at him, and then the paper, then at him again. He thinks I can win this. Nobody ever believes in me. I tell him, "I'm sorry, but I really don't think my art is good enough."

He shakes his head again and replies, "Well I do, and I think you should give it a try."

I just shake my head and walk away.

While I'm sitting in English class. I can't get myself to focus. All I keep thinking about is painting. I don't know what to do about it. I know I won't win, but I could really use that money. Mom and Dad have good jobs, but we're still pretty tight on money right now. I know I'm only a junior, but I still have to get into a good college, and I found out that the better the school the more money it is. So it's

settled. I'll submit the painting, but not because it's good; just because I could really use the money.

After school I drive home. I decide I will get another workout in before I start homework. On average I usually work out two to three times a day. When I finish with my second workout, I get up to get some water. I stand up, but everything becomes blurry. Everything is spinning, and I feel like I am falling. I drift into unconsciousness. When I wake up, I'm on the floor and tired. I'm tired every day, but I've never been this tired. I try to get up again, and this time, thankfully, I don't faint. I look at the clock and realize I have been out for about fifteen minutes. I get some water and sit down on the couch. I know I should eat something, but I can't get myself to do it. Instead, I work on homework.

A little while later, I wake up. I must have fallen asleep while watching IT. How can anyone sleep through IT? I must have been really tired. I get up off the couch and head to my room. Just as I get to my room, I remember I didn't do my third workout of the day. It will be okay, right? I start to panic. *I'm going to get fatter. How could I have forgotten? I must do it; Chloe will make fun of me.* Thoughts race through my head while I go to check the time: 1:00 a.m. I go to my room again and change quickly into some workout clothes, determined to get my third workout in. I go downstairs and put running shoes on and a coat. When I get outside it is freezing, but I don't care. I need this workout. After running five miles, I get back to my house and see that it is now 1:45. I change into my pajamas and lie in my bed. I quickly drift into unconsciousness.

The next few days are the same. *I hate how I never change, but I can't get myself to do anything about it.* This is the routine I do for weeks. I never eat anything and am slowly getting more and more dizzy. My headaches are also getting worse. I faint every other day now. I'm just glad no

one has noticed. There is one person who's making me nervous though. Mr. William. He keeps asking why I don't eat lunch, and it is getting very difficult to come up with an excuse. One day he even threatened to call my parents. To stop him I had to eat an apple. Of course I threw it up right after.

The art competition is in a couple of days. Everyone who entered has to come and awards will be given out to the top three places. I still don't think I'm going to win, but Mr. William is adamant that my painting skills are "magnificent." Whatever. The ceremony is held in the nearby town of Albany because of the bigger stage. Mr. William, Mom, and I are all going. This is the first time in a long while that I actually feel excited for something.

When the day finally arrives, I decide to wear a navy blue dress with a black belt. I'm not sure if I want to wear it, though, because you can see all my fat rolls. To cover them up I wear a white cardigan. *I'm a long way from pretty, but I don't look hideous.* I am definitely a little nervous, though, because Chloe put in a piece, too. She will win without a doubt. I just hope she doesn't comment on my clothing or my art.

Mom calls from downstairs, "Come on sweetie we have to go."

This must be special to Mom because she even took the day off. She has never taken a day off, even when she had pneumonia.

I call down, "Be right there, Mom." I take one last look at myself and head downstairs.

When we get there, the building is huge. Mr. William wasn't kidding when he said that the competition was large. It's massive. There are so many kids here. Everyone is busy running around trying to get set up for the ceremony. Mom

sees Mr. William and says “Is that your teacher?” I reply by nodding my head, too nervous to say anything.

As the ceremony begins, a man comes on the stage. Apparently he is the founder of this competition. During the speeches all I can think about is my body. *Why did I wear this dress?* I didn’t think it looked too bad, but now all I can see is my fat rolls. I really just want to get to the awards and find out who won.

When they finally were about to announce the winners, there was a drum roll and dramatic lighting. The founder begins with third place. “And the third place winner is Noah Smith,” he states. Everyone cheers and Noah gets a medal and fifty dollars.

“And the second place winner is...Chloe Jones,” the founder says. I am surprised by this. I thought for sure she got first place. I wonder who got first if not her? Chloe also got a medal, but instead of fifty dollars, she got a hundred.

“And the moment we have all been waiting for, the winner of the 2020 annual art competition is... Grace Moore!”

Wait, did he just say my name. No, he has to be mistaken. He can’t really mean me.

“Grace Moore, is there a Grace Moore?” he repeats. Mom starts to push my shoulder and tells me to go up there.

Wow, I can’t believe I just won. I don’t know what to do. My thoughts are all jumbled. Oh my gosh, my dress. They’re going to think I look so gross. Why did I wear this? Still in shock I start to get up and walk on the stage.

The founder puts a medal around my neck and says, “Congratulations, Grace, your piece is incredible.”

I thank him, still dumbfounded. I begin my short acceptance speech by stating, “You have no idea how much...” I start to get severely dizzy and the lights are so

bright. I feel like I am floating. All of a sudden everything goes black.

When I start to wake up, I don't know where I am. I am beginning to get very scared, but when my parents come into view, I calm down instantly. My dad calmly says, "You are in the hospital. You have been here for three days. You are very lucky. The doctors said you could have died. They also said that you weigh ninety-five pounds and have been starving yourself for months."

Instantly I think my parents are going to be so angry at me and start yelling, but they just look sad. My mom asks, "Honey, why are you starving yourself? You're so beautiful."

At that moment I know I need to change. I can see mom's heart breaking and it breaks my heart, too. I am not beautiful. Ugly, hideous, or atrocious is closer to what I look like, but I never want to see my mom's heart break again.

Dad was right. The doctors said that if they hadn't gotten to me when they did, I would have died the next day or so. I don't want to die. I just wanted to be skinny.

I don't really understand what the big fuss about it is. Everyone is trying to force feed me. They actually put a feeding tube up my nose. It scares me half to death knowing I'm getting this many calories. I tried to tell them I would eat more, but they didn't believe me. It is true that I would try to eat more, but I would never eat as much as they are giving me in my feeding tube.

I do want to get better, but it is so hard. I don't like my doctors very much, but they made me go to a therapist lady, and she is pretty awesome. Unlike the doctors, she doesn't force me to talk to her about it. She will just let me sit there until I feel ready to open up to her. She says that the road to recovery is long and hard, but that she will be by my side every step. Right now, the only thing getting me through is

that I know I always will have my family supporting me. They say that they will never let me get to that point again. They took off weeks of work and let me stay home from school. I know that I will have a million steps back. But as long as I take one step forward, I know that I am still improving.

Elizabeth Lenning
Lamberton, MN
2nd Place

The Torn City

A city is a place, a community, a home. But here in Cladwell, it's different. People say that it's a torn city, or a broken city. People say that if you go to the west side of town, you won't come back.

In the center of the west side is a huge, old brick building. There are big, bold steps on the front of the building, and they are covered in cold, dripping blood. The townspeople say that there is a young boy in there, starving and alone. On the street there are broken, abandoned cars.

The other side of town we call the east wing. It's like any other normal city. There are long sunny days and children that laugh and play. Adults go out on their morning jogs, and old men walk their dogs. It's just like any other town.

It was July 11th when my two best friends and I decided to go to the other side of town. It was my fifteenth birthday and it was fifteen years ago that day that the city had torn. My name is Cody Lance, and I was born on the west side of town. My mom and I had managed to escape to the east side of town, but I never got the chance to meet my dad. I have always wanted to meet my dad; that's why my friends and I decided to go to the other side. I can only hope to find out what happened to him, but I still dream that he's alive.

My best friends are Austin and Shawna. Austin is shy and has blond hair and blue eyes and pale white skin. Shawna is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen; she has bright green eyes, and dark red hair, and her skin is as pale as the moon. When Shawna was seven years old, she moved

here to live with Austin and his parents after her parents had gotten a divorce. The divorce had made her mom a horrible alcoholic, and the government felt she wasn't fit to take care of a child. Her dad had left right after the divorce. I have always had sympathy for her because I know my mom, but she can't see hers even though she knows that she's out there.

Now, walking over to the other side, I can't help but wonder why my friends are coming with me, and I can't help but hope we are safe. We feel a sharp cold breeze as we cross to the other side, and I feel like we are being watched. I keep thinking I hear whispers, and I look around to see where they are coming from, but I can't see anyone.

Suddenly, I hear a scream from behind me. I turn and see Austin laying on the ground. There is a white mist around him, and he keeps screaming. "Get it off me! Get it off!"

Shawna runs over and starts pulling the mist. It's almost as if the mist has a skin around it to grab. It finally frees Austin, and we can see his neck is covered in blood and he can't breathe very well. I run over and help him to his feet. He starts to wheeze and lets out a small breath of words which I can barely understand 'til he says it again.

"There are more coming; look through my glasses!"

I grab his glasses and put them on. As soon as I do, I see them: six small white ghosts that seem to be coming towards us. We realize they want to hurt us. I tell Austin to get on my back since he can't breathe very well, and we run back towards the other side.

When we get there, we can't get through. There is a barrier so we can't get back. We pound on the barrier as people walk by and try to get their attention, but they don't even glance over at us. They can't see us or hear us, and we realize there is no way out.

We turn around and look for a safe place to hide. We see many houses, but most of them are broken and not safe to be in. We run a couple of blocks until I find a house I think is safe.

Shawna runs up and opens the door for us, and we go in. Once we are inside the house, we take off our backpacks and look for the first aid kit to help Austin. We find it in Shawna's backpack and start to clean his neck and nose. He has five long cuts along the side of his neck and a bloody nose.

Once we finish and he says he feels fine, we start to look around. All the windows are covered, but we move a curtain to look outside and see the ghosts can't get into the house. It's as if there is a force field so that they can't hurt anyone inside. When they come near, they just slam into the outside of the house.

The house is small, but we know it will work until we are able to leave. I go look around the house to see if I can find anything useful. The last room I go into is the biggest room in the house. I can't find anything important in the room until I look on the bed, and I see a diary. I open it, and a map of the city with a note falls out, and I find the whole story of how the city tore. At first I didn't believe it, until I read the last page and see the signature. It looks like a whole different person wrote it, someone with very shaky hands, almost like a ghost.

I go into the living room where Shawna and Austin are talking and tell them what I found. I read the note out loud:

"The city was torn by brothers who got in a fight. The older brother learned magic and tore the city and said that whoever wanted to live needed to leave, but the other brother tried to stop him. The cure ricocheted so it only went to one half of the city. The youngest brother then erased everyone's

memory on that side of the city and told everyone not to go to the other side.”

When I finish, Shawna is in awe, and I am confused. “Why has nobody ever known about the brothers?” I say.

“I’m not sure, but now we know the truth.”

“Why were the brothers mad?” I wonder. “But on the last page, it says that all the people that were left on the side were turned into ghosts and zombies. It also says that you can reverse it if we find the younger brother, and that his name is Samson,” I say.

Shawna then stands up and says, “We have to find him!”

Suddenly Austin stands up. “Cody, I think we should go find the brothers. I think we need to find Jack and Jay.”

“Who are Jack and Jay?” asks Shawna.

“These are the wizard’s names I found where it says their names in the book. It says their names are Jack and Jay Stone. The younger brother is Jack and the older brother is Jay. I think we need to go find them,” Austin replies.

Just as Shawna was about to start talking, my phone starts buzzing. I look down and see ten missed calls from my mom, and she is calling again. I guess I hadn’t been paying any attention to my phone. I answer the phone and before my mom could say anything, I explain to her everything that had happened, then hang up before she can respond.

We decide to stay the night and head for the brick building in the morning. There are three bedrooms in the house, so we each get our own bed. I push my head into the pillow and realize how gross it smells, but I don’t care. I roll over and fall asleep in no time.

We wake up to a loud sound of banging. I look around and see Austin waving at me to come down to the basement. I duck down and run over to her and down the stairs. When I get down there, I see that Shawna is already there, huddled up in a corner and crying.

After about five minutes, we hear the banging stop and we sit and wait for Shawna to stop crying. Shawna calms down soon after, and I ask Austin what was happening.

Austin says, "I think they were those ghost people, but they looked bigger and stronger than the ones from yesterday."

"Did you bring your extra glasses so we can see them, too?" I ask Austin.

He pulls out his extra glasses for me to wear, and we go search the rest of the house for a pair for Shawna.

We realize that if the ghosts have already gotten this far we need to leave now. We all run back upstairs and grab our backpacks. We leave out the back door and start running along the ally. We get to the end and turn left and go towards the brick building. When I realize I forgot the map, I run back and grab it.

I run back to the others and hand the map to Shawna. She looks at me and takes the map. When she looks up at the sun, it hits her red hair and makes a gleaming golden ring around her head. She looks so beautiful I could just lean over and kiss her then and there, if only I had the nerve to tell her how I feel. But I come back into reality when she looks away and opens the map.

When she opens it, a letter falls out. I pick it up and open the envelope. The letter reads:

Whoever has found this map is a very lucky person, for this map is magic. I am the man who made this map. I am Jack Sane. If you have found this map, it means my brother has torn the city. I have made this map so if you are stuck on the other side you can see anything coming for you. When you open my map it shows the name of all people around and if any evil spirits are coming for you. You will be able to see any people or spirits you are about to meet in the streets. When you enter a building the map changes to the building,

this way you may see where anyone or anything is. If you have found this map you are the new owner and the map can lead you to me.

Sincerely yours, Jack Sone

“Wow, that’s so cool, let’s try it,” I say.

The map slowly shifts, and we can see everything around us. We can even see our names.

“We have to keep walking. Let’s go. I will watch the map,” said Shawna.

We walk for many blocks aimlessly through the streets. It’s sad to me how just fifteen years ago this was a great city. I think about how I was born here, how my mom grew up here. This half of the city was where my parents met each other. I think about how my mom has never dated anyone since my dad, and how she is just waiting for him to come home. I know that I have to find him, but not just for me, for my mom. And of course, I think about how our city was the biggest city in the world before it tore.

I don’t know how long we’ve been walking, and I don’t know how far away from the building we are.

“I think we should stop somewhere and rest, maybe make a plan on what to do if we don’t make it to the brick building, or if we can’t get in,” Shawna says out of the corner of my ear.

I look around at the street we are on. There are three standing houses and two that look like they could have collapsed a minute ago. There is a small blue house, a small yellow house, and a big green house. Shawna runs up to the green house and starts running up the stairs. She gets half way up the stairs when she breaks through the floor. We run over as fast as we can. I look down the hole and see her body lying there. I jump down into the basement of the house and try to wake her up. I feel for her pulse, and her heart is still

beating. I take her backpack off her and throw it up to Austin. I then throw up the map.

Austin catches it and looks down. “No, we can’t stay here. We have to get into a safe house.”

I look up and know he’s right. I very carefully pick up Shawna and try my hardest to get her up to Austin. Austin grabs her under the armpits and pulls her up through the hole. I jump up and pull myself up through the hole.

Once I’m up, we run over to the small blue house. Austin carries Shawna, and I carry all three backpacks and the map. I open the door to the house and Austin runs in. Just inside the door is a couch. Austin lays Shawna down, and I lay our backpack with clothes under her head. I feel her pulse again. “She’s still breathing,” I say. Austin gets his water bottle and lays it on her forehead. We take turns watching Shawna and the map.

It’s around 2:30 when I look over and see Shawna opening her eyes. She looks over at me. “Where are we?” she asks.

In the house next door. You fell through the floor of the other house and passed out. We’re gonna finish going to the brick building tomorrow,” I reply. She lay there silently just staring at me. I walk over to her and sit next to the couch and put my hand on her head. She is feeling much better now.

That night as I lay in bed, I drift off to sleep thinking about how I might meet my dad soon. We wake up early the next morning to make sure we can beat the mob. We open the map and head for the building. We get there fast with no problems. We slowly walk up the steps and I pull on the bell. The floor cracks under us and we fall in the building. We land on the soft ground. I look up and see the stairs closing up above us. Suddenly I hear a boy’s voice talking to us, and I look up and see him.

I ask, “Are you Jack?” The boy looks at me in disbelief and asks how I know it is him.

Austin gets the book and the map out of his backpack and shows him. The look on Jack’s face is priceless. He turns around and tells us to follow him.

He leads us out of the room and up three flights of stairs. The room we are led into looks like a very nice apartment. There is a large open kitchen attached to a long dining room and a huge living space and stairs that I assume lead up to bedrooms and offices. He walks over to the window closest to us and presses a button. Suddenly we can see everything outside. We see the ghosts as people and we see their names above them.

“I know why you are here, and I have been expecting you. I will help you find your dad and get him to come home safely with you, but there are some things I need to speak with you about first, Cody. Shawna and Austin, you will find rooms for you upstairs and clean clothes and bathrooms. You can shower while I speak with Cody.”

My heart is racing so fast I think I might die. *I’m finally getting answers*, I say in my head.

He walks me over to a couch, asks me to sit down, and I did. He sits next to me and takes a deep breath.

“I am your great uncle. My name is Jack Sone, and my brother Jay Sone is your grandpa. I am going to tell you a story about this city and why it split,” said Jack.

“No,” I say. “I don’t have any grandpas. My dad’s parents died in a fire and Grandma said her husband died of a heart attack.”

“Yes, that is what your grandma told you because that’s what I told her had happened. The reason that your grandfather tore the city is because of your birth. When your grandfather found out your mom was pregnant, he went insane. He learned evil, dark magic so that he could curse

your father for getting his daughter pregnant. Your grandfather was going to kill you because your parents weren't married and your grandfather believed it was wrong to conceive a child before marriage. I tried to stop your grandfather with love and save you and your father. When I used love to try and stop him, the city split. I tried to get everyone out, but your grandfather held your dad and his evil followers back."

"Do you know where my dad is?" I ask.

"Yes," he replies, "he is here with us in this building. I have kept him safe, but I can't get him to the other side of town without you. You are the key to fixing the city."

"I am?" I ask incredulously.

"Yes, you are. When I saved you, I gave you the power to fix the city with love. All you had to do was take a chance on love to find your father. Once you are at the border with your dad, the city will be fixed, and you will have your dad back," Jack says.

"Wait, so my dad is here? Can I go see him? Why didn't you tell me this first? Is my dad okay?"

"See, when I found your dad, I found him as a spirit, like the one that attacked your friend. I have your father's spirit in a jar and his body is downstairs. When you get to your side of town, release the spirit and the body will magically come and the land will be healed," says Jack. "I think it's best that you and your friends go rest tonight and leave at dawn."

"Yes, that sounds good. I think I'm going to go upstairs now and shower if that's okay?" I say.

"Yes that is perfectly fine, Cody," replies Jack.

As I run up the stairs, I turn around and say, "Is it okay if I call you Uncle Jack?"

"I would like that very much," says Uncle Jack. When I get up the stairs, I find a room with my name on the door. I

walk in and find some clean clothes on the bed. I pick up the clothes and go into the bathroom to shower.

The next morning when I wake up, I am so excited I can't believe it. I rush out the door and down the stairs. I eat my breakfast so fast that it surprises me when I am done.

"Are you ready to go back home?" asks Uncle Jack

"Yes I am. What about you, Austin?" says Shawna.

"I don't know; it's been a fun time here," says Austin.

"I'm just excited to meet my dad," I add into the conversation. After breakfast, we gather up our stuff, and Uncle Jack pulls me over to the side and hands me the jar with my dad's spirit. I thank him and give him a big hug before leaving.

Shawna pulls out the map and we start heading for the border. We run the first five blocks or so and then take a long look at the map to see if anything was near us. We find a few ghosts two blocks north, so we keep running straight to the border, hoping that we can get back soon. We stop every few blocks and look at the map again, then keep heading towards the border. No one says anything as we run.

We reach the border of town and see the town we grew up in. I look over at Shawna. She is still the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. I reach down and grab her hand as we step foot on the other side.

I don't remember anything being so bright or happy or loving, but this might have been the best moment of my life. I let go of Shawna's hand, grab the jar of my dad, and open it. There he is, standing in front of me, his blue eyes looking into mine, and I know this is the man I've been searching for all of my life. I run over and hug my dad. We stand there forever. I can feel his chest moving up and down after every breath and hear his heart beating. "Hello Cody," I hear my dad whisper, and I whisper back, "I love you, Dad."

Alyssa Cowan
Storden, MN
3rd Place

The Morning

Max

It was my mission to kill Alana, but she just had something to her that made me love her. She had dark blue eyes that sparkled in the light, with dirty blonde hair that went a couple inches past her shoulders. And the most beautiful smile she made without even knowing it.

I was supposed to kill her because I met her at an art gala where I was hired to kill someone there. I saw her looking at the art, mesmerized by each painting. I walked up to her and got to know her and got her number. We never hung out until Alija hired me to kill her. I am a hitman, so I get all my jobs from people who need someone gone.

I was supposed to poison her drink at the ball, and I did. The ball was at an old mansion that was owed, but was sold and was turned into a hotel. There were chandeliers from the ceiling and marble pillars in the shape of an octagon, with matching marble floors.

The poison was supposed to work starting four hours after it entered the human system. I did not get told what drug it was, but it did not matter at that point. At the last minute, I switched our drinks when she went to use the restroom. I felt better knowing that she would be safe from me.

Alana was dressed in a floor-length, emerald green dress. I was in a black tuxedo with a bow tie. I asked her to dance. She was very reluctant about it at first, but she eventually agreed. Alana and I were dancing to a waltz.

I said, "You look lovely tonight, Alana."

Alana smiled. “You look handsome in your suit, Max,” she said.

I didn’t know if she was just saying that to make small talk or meant it. But by the radiant smile on her face I think that she meant it.

I looked away for a second and saw Alija, the man that hired me to kill Alana. He looked at me and nodded. At that moment, I knew if I did not kill her that he would kill me. I was prepared for that because I had a gun on the bottom of my leg, but I also knew that Alija had other people working for him at this ball.

I asked Alana if she wanted to sit down and rest because she kept leaning on me while we danced. We sat and talked. A couple that Alana knew came over to talk. I excused myself to get us more drinks and made my way over to Alija and said, “I am getting her more champagne, and I will put the poison in there.”

Put it in now so I can see,” he replied. I did what he said.

“You know, Max,” Alija said, “I really thought that this would be easy for you, but apparently I was wrong.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I will get the job done. She will be dead in the morning.”

“She better be,” Alija threatened.

I walked away and held both drinks in front of me. I switched them when my back was to Alija. At that point, I did not have a plan on how I was going to not drink mine because I knew that Alija would be watching me as well.

I walked back to Alana. She was sitting there all alone. I gave her the drink and she took a sip. I looked at Alija, watching from across the room. He nodded and walked away. He knew I had done my job and he would send me the money the next morning. I never drank the poisoned champagne; I set it down on an empty serving platter and

knocked it over so no one would drink it. A server came to clean it up.

Alana's favorite song came on, and she asked me to dance. I declined, but then she started begging me to dance with her. I gave in and danced with her until slow songs started to get requested. We danced to those, too. She rested her head on my shoulder. She started to drift off slowly, which didn't surprise me because it was rounding the hour to three in the morning. I offered to take her to her hotel room and check on her in the morning. She agreed, and I escorted her out of the ball.

Once we got there, I went to the other side of the car, picked up Alana, and carried her to her suite. I told her good night and said that I would see her in the morning. On my way out, I told the front desk to send up her best friend, Oaklyn. I wrote her a note saying that I hope she sleeps well and gets some rest.

When Alana called me the next morning, I told her to stay in her hotel room until I got there. She was so confused, but I told her to trust me. She did.

I said, "I planned on killing you, but then I got to know you better. I knew if I killed you it would be the worst mistake I ever made. I didn't want to tell you then so I am telling you now. You are caring and smart and beautiful. So last night I switched our drinks. When I accidentally knocked over the tray, it was not an accident to do it. And I could not tell you earlier because I needed you to be calm around me."

When I got there, she was mad. She was confused at first, and then she started to get mad.

Alana was screaming at me to the point where I had to put my hand over her mouth or people might think that she was being hurt. When she stopped screaming she told me to get out.

I said, “If I leave and you are walking around and someone sees you, they will kill you! They don’t care who is around, they will kill you! You need to understand that.”

She stood there, not saying anything. She started to cry. “What do I do? Are they going to find me? Am I going to die?”

“As long as you do what I say you won’t die.”

She would not stop crying.

“You will be fine. You just need to stay here until I call you. I am going to go and sort things out. You will be fine, okay?” I shut all the blinds and turned off all the lights. “I am going to go. Don’t call or text anyone. I will be back.”

I left and went back to my hotel room. I grabbed everything that I needed to kill Alija. I started to walk to Alija’s hotel, One Star, when I got a message from him. It read, meet me in the lobby of the One Star. I started to walk faster.

Once I got there I saw him sitting at a table alone. No one else was in the lobby. I didn’t know what to expect. I sat down, and we started to talk about how I poisoned the drink, and he said he wanted me to show him the dead body.

I said, “I walked her to her hotel room, but she saw one of her friends and went with her.”

“Okay, then why has the body not been reported?” Alija said. Then I saw him reach behind his back.

“It is only 9:00 in the morning, and they are probably still asleep.”

His hand stayed behind his back, then it quickly came around and I was shot.

Alana

Max was dead, killed by Alija. I found out when it was broadcast on the news later in the afternoon. A gunshot at the hotel was reported to the police station and his body was

found. Then I had no one to save me but myself. I knew they were going to come for me because I was not dead. So I didn't have time to feel anything. The only thing I knew that I would do was get my revenge. But the first thing I had to do was get out of that hotel room because that was the first place they would look. I put on a pair of tennis shoes and started running and didn't look back.

POETRY
Grades 11 & 12

Jaden Scholl
Westbrook, MN
1st Place

Requiem of My Girlhood

It's the dimpling of hip bones and the squishiness
of young thighs. The stretching of unfamiliar skin and the
shedding of her own body; left stains in underwear
she's *outgrowing*.

She's *outgrowing* her friends, her dresses, her dolls; made
pretend to get married because it's every little girl's dream
to be *given away*.

Given away to boys who make her feel like poetry...like
honey dripping between lips and seeping between crooked,
cavities teeth onto tongues that hadn't tasted her mother's
cooking since she was seven.

To grow a girl, motherless for so long, she hadn't know what
every girl knows, comparison will be inevitable.
To find contentment in a body, always under scrutiny is not a
simple feat; but an admirable accomplishment
once achieved.

Like worth is only determined by preference and societal
morality governed by men who only know power over *girls*.
It's the grown men whistling at her fifteen year old chest.
It's the boys, for taunting her inexperience... but then hold it
up as a trophy once chipped away at.

When she is told, "Quiet, down!" when she has only been
breathing the same air that harbored jabs at her *femininity*.

Taught she was limited only because of the soft muscles
everyone wishes to invade.

Femininity that was never her choice but hers to love.

And she *loves* it.

The curving, the bubbles of body, the breathiness of her voice.
Her daintiness ‘that compliments her sternness. A voice so
opinionated and powerful she’s made a room of men fold
and *cry*.

Cry for her.

She will not hand you her skirt to wipe
the snot and fascism from your chin.

She will collect it in mason jars and use it as nail polish;
make jewelry from all of the love she never received.

I will forever be her;
I always want to be one:
a *girl*.

Jaden Scholl
Westbrook, MN
2nd Place

There was this Night that...

you hadn't held my hand,

but the hug you gave me was so tender I forgave you.
There was this luminescence that the street light gave your
cheeks; bounced off of you like high beams in the fog but
your eyes were the headlights in front of me.

The moon looked so sad that night, but we weren't.

How childish of us to giggle in graveyards
as the clouds curled like smoke and...
purples and pinks were dripping down onto us.
I wanted you to look at this but instead you gazed at me
and I never realized why until tonight.

You were never part of my plan but you are now.
You'll be the reason why I'll have smile lines and crow's
feet and will have to learn how to change a tire.

These are all on sticky notes above my head, tacked close
to my brain; so as not to forget...
the beginning.

Of awkward silences and asking me what my favorite color is.
Of catching you stealing glances at park benches and stop lights.
You remind me of gummy worms, of sweaty palms, of
rumble strips being grazed and that sudden jolt of realization,
"I'm not paying attention to the road."

This jolt—
It was you.
It will always be you.

Alisha Wong
Farmington, MN
3rd Place

to fester, to feast

& they lick their parched lips preferring to feast upon
golden expectations because that color too
adorns them
they say it's in your veins
you just have to show it
& raise their champagne glasses
toasting to the ripening main course

when I watch my embittered
ten eleven twelve-year-old selves
sitting with blood trickling from their tongues
as they bite down the answers ink-stained
hands frostbitten from raising them
too high from their heads
I realize the decaying process has begun

gymnopédie whispers a diminuendo
of how to radiate oriental otherness I nod
along to its quarter notes while the piano keys sand
my fingertips into nubs thick silky strands
of hair descends from my scalp when I brush off
the follicles & my cousin's concern
it is considered an elegance
when one gouges out a cavity of
indifference & achievement

my tears are glass shards that pierce
into my organs until I am drained

& eviscerated lips rivered in cracks
divulge episodes of biting
peeling
carving
because I did not brand the textbooks
onto my skin

I try not to dwell on how my viscera
splatter against classroom walls
how my withered limbs are melded into the
piano bench what a gothic sight indeed

& eventually when they dab their wine-stained lips
& ask to see my senior picture
what's left of me gutted & rotting
perks up
for I can finally show them
what they have devoured

FICTION
Grades 11 & 12

Elizabeth Wiggins
Walnut Grove, MN
1st Place

The Last Meal

The “Last Meal” program for the men and women upon death row in Texas started in 1934, with the execution of murderer Jesse Mott. The state of Texas abolished last meal requests in 2011. Lawrence Russell Brewer ordered a feast and then told officers that he “simply wasn’t hungry,” leading to all death row inmates executed in Texas after 2011 being given ‘normal prison food.’

“**Y**ou’re late,” I snap as my assistant Ruby scuttles into the room like a mouse in the wall.

“Ms. Evelyn, I...I’m so sorry, the traffic was—” she stammers as she speaks, yet I have no time to listen to her excuses. We have a job to do. The door to my kitchen groans as a tall, good lookin’ young man with shiny shoes saunters in.

“What can I do for you, officer?”

“Ms. Evelyn, I gon’ need this by 4:00.”

The good lookin’ officer slides a small card across the long metal table I am leaned up against.

Lawrence Russell Brewer

Sex: M Age: 44 Race: White TDCJ#999327

Last Meal Request: Two chicken-fried steaks topped with gravy and sliced onions; a triple-patty bacon cheeseburger; one pound of barbecued meat with half a loaf of white bread; a meat-lover’s pizza; three fully loaded fajitas; a cheese omelet with ground beef, tomatoes, onions, bell

peppers, and jalapeños; a bowl of fried okra with ketchup; one pint of Blue Bell vanilla ice cream; a plate of peanut-butter fudge topped with crushed peanuts; three root beers; and a pecan pie.

“By 4:00?! It is 9:00. How on God’s green Earth am I supposed to make this in seven hours?!” I am visionless as the blind rage crawls up my chest and fogs behind my temples. I had been planning this day out in my head for 26 years. As I continued my internal battle, Officer Bad News slips right back out the door he came. “Ruby,” I snap trying to gather my thoughts, “go to the fridge and carry in all the beef, chicken, and pork you can hold.”

Ruby May Ellen started working here in ‘08 along the same time the stock market fell. Her blushed skin always seemin’ to be flushed some sort of pink along with the dusting of dappled dots that drift on top of her skin. Her skin sits as a quiet background to the hazel eyes and head of uncontrollable hair that sits atop her heart-shaped face. The cinnamon-colored ringlets of hair cascade down her back as they sneak their way out of the messy bun that she fastens upon her head. Smack dab between her set of pearly whites is a gap so wide she could almost fit a third tooth in there. She’ll flash that perfect smile of hers, and I get this hot, heavy feeling. That’s my Ruby.

“Ruby, time check?” Salty sweat slips its way along the deep grooves and wrinkles in my forehead. I hold my floral apron in my quivering hands and then absorb the moisture upon my face.

“10:45, and I have finished browning the beef.” Ruby releases a breath she has held for way too long, winded from the marathon-run between the fridge in the backroom, back to the kitchen. I watch as she stumbles her way to the long metal table in the middle of the room, resting her head in her arms, breathing heavily.

“Start on that fudge now darlin’, we ain’t got the time for no breaks,” I order as the oil from the sizzling chicken below me launches little torpedoes of burning oil back at me. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch her whispering a little something under her breath as she stands back up. Today isn’t my day.

I fell a couple of months ago, real hard. I don’t remember where I was or what happened, but I know what meal I was makin’. The day was July 7, 2011, and I was making a meal for prisoner TDCJ# 999162, Humberto Leal Garcia. His request: fried chicken, pico de gallo, tacos, a bowl of fried okra, and two cans of Coca-Cola. I was doing my job. I had placed everything on the tray all neat and done-up like a mother would, and that was it. That was all I remembered; I didn’t even know if he had liked it or eaten any of it because right there in the middle of my kitchen, I lost consciousness. I was taken to the E.R. and pumped full of God-knows-what, left there in a bed. Ruby was there, but that was it.

“Ruby girl, time check,” I pant, up to my arms in chocolate and peanut butter.

“1:03 ma’am,” Ruby shouts from the opposite side of the kitchen.

My kitchen is beautiful; shaped in a long rectangle with three ovens and a sink along one long wall and pantry shelves holding dry goods along the other. The back wall has just a large metal door with a latch handle. Behind it is the walk-in fridge and freezer. Wrapping the floor are milky green tiles and straight in the middle under the table is a drain, which I assume goes right out to the ocean. The long metal table rides right through the middle of the room, forcing you to walk around him if you want to get anywhere. The only entrance to the kitchen 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. Above the sink is a long, horizontal, stained glass window, the window I set my plants on to try to liven up the room a little.

“Ruby, where are we at with those fajitas?” I call out as we only have three hours left with about five hours more work to do.

“Ms. Evelyn, the gravy, the okra, the fajitas, and the meat-lover’s pizza are done, and I am just waiting on the meat t—” Just before Ruby could finish her laundry list of food items we have left to finish, she is interrupted by the obnoxious moan of the door with the long, skinny, green glass window.

“Get out of my kitchen.” I throw the words over my shoulder as I disregard the visitor.

“Now good afternoon to you, too, Ms. Evelyn.”

“Don’t make me say it again, Boy.” I turn from my freshly cut vegetables to face Officer Shiny Shoes. He saunters in as if by invitation and dips his finger directly into the simmering pot of creamy chicken and mushroom gravy. In an exaggerated-slow-motion, he sucks on his finger as if to confirm his suspicions that it was indeed gravy.

“Christ Almighty, Ruby, you sure are a good cook,” he shines a tantalizing smile from under his patchy handlebar mustache. “I bet there are,” he pauses, and as he does, he slinks his way deeper into my kitchen, “a lot more things you are good at.” He stands over her, and I watch in disgust as sweet Ruby recoils from his breath upon her.

“How dare you, this is *my* kitchen. The only person that this food is prepared for is Mr. Brewer!” 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.

“Get out of my kitchen!” I can’t stop myself, and before I can, it’s up my throat and rolling off my tongue. “And get away from my assistant before I call your supervisor.”

He turns suddenly, marching up to me in long strides. His breath smells of creamy chicken and mushroom with a faint touch of brandy.

“My supervisor? Why, Ms. Evelyn, that is no way to talk to someone who is complimenting your work.” He lets out a small chuckle and continues. “Mr. Brewer? Do you mean Lawrence Russell Brewer, the white supremacist that dragged a black man behind his truck and left him to die in front of his church? Are you defending him, Ms. Evelyn?”

The raising of his voice is starting to make me sweat. Breathing hard and looking Officer Mustache dead in the eyes, I breathe: “Get out.”

And he does, but not before spitting a big ol’ loogie into the pot of creamy chicken and mushroom, slamming the door with a tumultuous, *BANG*, causing the long, skinny, green glass window to rattle.

When someone tells you: “I’ve got some bad news” you would assume the worst, and yet what you think may just be better. “You have cancer.” I guess that fall I took a couple of months back wasn’t just “a waste of time” or “a waste of valuable resources.” Maybe it was something to worry about. I mean, it can’t be that bad. Liz Taylor had a brain tumor. Bob Marley, even President Jimmy Carter. They said I wouldn’t make it two months; that was four months ago. “I’ve got some bad news;” the Texas Department of Criminal Justice issued me my two-week notice. The pink slip was just sittin’ on my desk. I went to the warden.

“Harrison, I have been cookin’ here for all but 30 years.”

“And I would like to personally thank you for all your years of service, but—” he starts to trail off as if he had just

thought of a better conversation he could be having somewhere else.

“Harrison?”

“Oh, yes... well Ms. Evelyn, no need to make this personal, but the Texas Board of Criminal Justice decided to end the Last Meal Program for Death Row Inmates.” And that was it.

I didn’t need to make it personal. It was the board, not me. Yet it is not like a 69-year-old woman with no family, no job, and a cancer diagnosis needs to take anything personally.

“Ms. Evelyn?”

“Yes, Ruby girl.”

“Why do you care about these foul men so much?”

I set the pan I was just washing down, gently. “Pardon?”

“Well, ma’am if I may, I started here in 2008, and I have never seen anyone treat these inmates with more respect and courtesy than you.” Ruby pauses, takes a deep breath, and continues what’s on her mind. “And to be a quite frank ma’am, these men are the most repulsive people I have ever heard of. Lawrence Brewer, for Christ’s sake, drug a black man around like a ragdoll for three miles, strapped to the back of a truck, and you have the nerve to scream at me and the officers around here for givin’ that horrid man a good ol’ farewell by spittin’ in his food!” Ruby is saying what has been gnawing at her for years now, and that is understandable.

But not in my kitchen.

“Ms. Evelyn it’s like yo—”

“Ruby,” I interrupt Ruby’s sermon successfully. “Understand this; until the day is done and until Mr. Brewer

gets his last supper, you will do as I say. Nod if you understand.”

And she does.

“Ruby, I need you to dump out the old gravy and start on a new pot. I will take over the pecan pie.” That’s my favorite part, the pecan pie at least. I turn around just to hear an almost inaudible *sniff*. I turn back to Ruby as she makes her way to the sink with the old pot of creamy chicken and mushroom gravy. Light from the window hits her face just right illuminating the tear trailing its way down her speckled cheek.

“Ruby.” I walk toward her, she sets the pot in the sink as I give her a tender embrace. I clasp her shoulders as if talking to a small child.

“Ruby, we have two hours to finish two chicken-fried steaks, a triple-patty bacon cheeseburger, one pound of barbecued meat, and a pecan pie. And to top that off we have to make the gravy all over again. If you want to have a conversation, we can have one, but we are gonna be working.”

And so we did, work at least: we sauteed and browned and cooked and baked. Until I heard a soft knocking at the door.

“Ruby, time check?”

“3:55”

“Alright Ruby, then that gives us five minutes, and that man will not come into my kitchen until they are up.”

When I am done with the day, I’ll wash all the dishes and put them away. I’ll shut off all the lights, lock the doors, and say goodbye to Stanley, the night shift guard. I’ll plod down the concrete hallway with no windows. I’ll get to the security door, swipe my key card, and enter the lobby. The

lobby is a quaint little entry with an ugly stained carpet making the pale pink a flesh-colored tan. The walls are painted blue but the cement behind it is easily seen behind the chips in the paint. I'll wave goodbye to Mabel, the receptionist, and make my way over to the little broom closet. Mabel lets me keep my jacket and galoshes in the closet fit for one. All bundled up I'll make my way to the outside world and into my car to make the thirty-minute drive to my single bedroom apartment, where I'll sit in front of the T.V. crocheting while the tumor in my brain slowly eats away at my mannerisms, memory, and speech. I'll go home, just like everyone else, just not to a husband and kids. I never had a man to cook for when I got home or kids that complain about steamed broccoli for supper. I learned to cook from my Mama. Now these boys behind the bars are my kids, and I cook for them, as my Mama did for me.

“It is 4:00, Ms. Evelyn. Please, I need to take the meal to his cell,” Officer Bad Breath squawks from behind the door with the long, skinny, green glass window. I quickly pull the pecan pie from out of oven number two and set it on a tray, wiping the edges with a napkin until they are sharp and clean. The caramelized sugar crust on top along with the swirled design of pecans is what makes a pecan pie the most superior of pies.

“We are ready,” Ruby declares as she opens the door only to be pushed aside by Officer Angel of Death.

“Alright, tonight on the menu for Mr. Brewer: two chicken-fried steaks covered in creamy chicken and mushroom gravy topped in sliced onions; a triple-patty bacon cheeseburger with lettuce; a cheese omelet with ground beef and all the toppings; a bowl of fried okra with extra ketchup; one pound of barbecued meat with half a loaf

of sliced white bread; three fully loaded fajitas; a meat-lover's pizza; one pint of Blue Bell vanilla ice cream; a plate of peanut butter fudge with crushed peanuts; three root beers; and a pecan pie."

"Thank you, Ms. Evelyn. The Warden says your final check will be on Mabel's desk before you leave," Officer Handlebar announces aloud as he grasps the cart holding the feast for the boy behind bars.

"Just wait!" I almost forgot. I hustled to the door just in time for him to catch the door. "Ruby come over here." I interlock my raisin looking hand with her plump, delicate one and walk her to the tray, hushing the objections of "no time" and "what are you doing" coming from the mouth of a mustache man. I pray. I pray that this man was to repent for the evil he has committed among his fellow brethren. I pray that this meal brings him as much comfort as the meals his mother made for him. I pray that he need not be scared when his time comes to meet his Holy Creator but tranquil and full of peace.

"Amen."

I struggle to wake as Ruby tenderly shakes my shoulders while I sleep in the corner of my little kitchen on the footstool I use when I can't reach things on the top shelf of the pantry.

"Come in." My bones ache as Ruby rushes to my side to help me up from the little pantry stool. Once up, Ruby opens the door as I reach to turn on the sink to prepare for the colossal amount of daily dishes I am about to wash. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Ruby whisk into the hallway with a gasp. I turn back and observe the porcelain sink start to bubble and froth at the mouth with the excess amount of soap I accidentally dropped in. Ruby slinks back into the

room and, as dramatic as ever, slowly walks her way toward me.

“Now Ms. Evelyn I...” she trails off, she can’t even look me in the eyes.

I look up past her at the door and low and behold there stands before me, Officer Sad Eyes, and trailing behind him, I can’t quite see, is the cart. As he pushes open the door I can almost vomit in shock. Behind the officer with the ugly mustache and the shiny shoes is the cart holding the last meal, my last meal. Untouched. A sob escapes me as the fog in my head falls behind my eyes, causing me to double over. I slam my hands on the long metal table. The immense fire in my chest rips its way up my throat and out my eyes. Hot streams of tears flood down my face as Ruby rushes to my side.

He pushes the cart inside the room and tenderly shuts the door with the green glass window, the color of old coke bottles. I sink to the floor, Ruby holding me. This was supposed to be my perfect last meal, the end of all endings. I wanted to be the one to comfort this man into death in the most maternal way possible, and he didn’t touch a single thing.

“Ruby girl,” I gasp through tears of sorrow.

“Yes ma’am?” Ruby squeaks through tears of her own.

“I have cancer; they say I won’t make it for two months.” I let out a shaky exhale, “Ruby Darlin,’ this was it, my last meal here.” Ruby stands. At the same time I shut my eyes, because if I do, maybe the trance will lift. I open them again to see Ruby holding a plate of pecan pie with a scoop of ice cream on top.

“I know it is your favorite, and I mean he didn’t eat it...it’s still warm.” Ruby hands me a fork. “Shall we?” she tilts her head and smiles her toothy grin, and I take a bite.

* * *

I watch as Ms. Evelyn takes a bite of her creation, shutting her eyes to heighten her senses and relish this moment we're sharing.

"My, Ms. Evelyn, this is a—" I lift my head from the plate in my hands and glance over at her. "Ms. Evelyn, you've fallen asleep." I giggle and set my plate to the side, jostling her stiff, slender shoulder. "Ms. Evelyn?" Shaking harder now, the alarm bells are ringing in my temples. Breathing hard, hot streams of salty sweat and tears spill down my cheeks, dripping off my nose onto the wrinkled blouse of the now peaceful, beautiful, yet unbreathing Ms. Evelyn. I glance at the menacing black clock on the wall. Time check: 7:46 p.m. and no pulse.

Sydney Damhof
Prinsburg, MN
2nd Place

The Worst Winter of My Life

This winter would be like no other. I had finally convinced my father to let me go out sledding with some friends. We had gone through all the rules and made all the promises. I honestly don't remember what I was promising because it was going in one ear and out the other. All I remember of that morning was saying the words, "I promise." The friends that I was going to go with probably weren't the safest people, and knowing that now I wish I had never gone.

The sun was shining and I loved to hear the small crunch of snow under my feet. I remember how white and crisp the trees looked. They had snow covering their branches, and as the wind would blow small sparkling flurries would fall. It was a beautiful day like no other.

My friends and I had decided that we would take off around noon and ride until dark. I'm not really sure why I was invited. I had just started hanging out with this group, and I wasn't as cool as them, but I was glad they asked me to come with them. This would be my chance to make my way up the social ladder, and finally, be more than the shy girl.

I put my long brunette hair back in a braid and began to put my gear on. My dad had filled my sled with gas and had put extra gloves in the back compartment before he had left for work. My sled was neon orange, and the lettering on the side was a crisp clean white. I hopped on and drove off to let the adventure begin. As I revved the engine the roar it made sent electricity running through every vein in my body. It felt so cool to be riding with a group. I loved hearing the noises

of our six sleds combined. The humming seemed to rumble the earth. We came up to the lake. We all stopped in a straight line. Nicholas got off of his and walked over to mine.

He looked at me and said, “If you want to be a part of our group then you have to race against me and win.”

My body got an uneasy feeling, but I tried to ignore it and push it away. Everyone was looking at me. Tina walked over to me and assured me that everything would be okay, and they had all done it. She told me to watch out for soft and/or wet areas. I felt a little better and gave in. I wanted to be a part of this group so badly.

“It’s just one race, and you’re in,” I told myself.

I was nervous and I had a pit in my stomach. I thought about how my dad wouldn’t like this, and how I was supposed to be careful. They counted us down, and we were off. I could feel the adrenaline rushing through my body. Nicholas drove way faster than I thought. The speed we were going was nowhere near safe. The smallest bump or rock could send us flying. It was hard to try to get around him. For the most part, we would be side to side going around the same speed.

All of a sudden Nicholas swerved into me. We were going too fast and his sled bounced off of mine. He went flying the other way. His sled rolled to a stop. He had been thrown off and was a little ways from his sled. He laid there for a little bit, and I sat there terrified. I didn’t know how to react. My body felt frozen, and my stomach was sick. He got up and limped over to his tipped over sled. All of a sudden I heard a pop in the ice and before I could move my lips to say anything, Nicholas was gone. He and his sled had fallen through the ice. I let out a blood screeching scream. I could hear the humming of the others rushing over to me. I started to cry. I didn’t know what to do. I ran over to the hole in the

ice and I reached in, trying to find and feel for anything. The others rushed over to me yelling and crying. No one knew what to do. Finally, Tina spoke up and asked what we were going to tell our parents, and even his. We all stood there trying to come up with a story. I don't remember exactly what we said, but I do remember seeing his parents' faces turn white like they had seen a ghost. I will never forget that day, and I will never ride my sled again.

Sydney Damhof
Prinsburg, MN
3rd Place

Monster Juice

It was dark. I couldn't see a thing. I felt trapped, and all hope had left me. I turned around because I heard a rustling behind me. I felt something small pierce through my skin, and I felt myself drift off as I passed out. Before any of this happened it was a cold rainy day. The weathermen had predicted full sun for the day, but as usual, they were wrong. I had been hoping to go up North to our cabin and take the jet ski-out. However, the rain began to pour as I was driving.

"It's just my luck," I said out loud in a frustrated manner. As I continued to drive, the rain poured harder. My windshield wipers weren't able to clear the windshield long enough for me to see. I pulled off to the side of the road and decided it would be safer to sit and wait out the storm. I sat there for 20 minutes and decided it would probably be a while before it cleared. I turned on the radio, put it to a station that was playing some soft country songs, and shut my eyes. I decided I would take a nap. Time seemed to always fly by faster when I was sleeping.

When I woke up I could no longer hear the radio playing music. I couldn't see either. It was completely dark. I tried to move but I was tied down to something. I sat there terrified. I was no longer in the safety of my truck. I could slowly feel my body turn ice cold. I told myself that I needed to remain calm, or at least that's what I heard someone say on TV one time. All of a sudden I saw some light with the shadow of a black figure. Before I could open my mouth to make any type of noise, the figure walked into the room, and the light that had shown behind him had vanished. It was back to the

dark. I could hear someone shuffling around in the dark. I could hear whoever it was whispering. I wasn't sure whether to scream for help or if I should just sit there quietly. All of a sudden I heard a loud scream.

There was a voice coming from above me that spoke in a monotone voice saying, "All men to the red room. I repeat, all men to the red room."

Whoever was behind me started to run, or at least it sounded like running. I could hear the footsteps were rushed and farther apart. There were also sounds of heavy breathing. I felt them brush past me, and I became confused. They opened what I assumed to be a door, and I saw the light appear around them. Just as soon as the light had appeared, it disappeared, and I was once again left in darkness. I thought I was alone, but just as I was about to holler I heard something.

"Is someone there?" I asked.

There was no answer. I figured I was hearing things, and I began to think of an escape plan. All of a sudden, I felt something small pierce through my skin on my wrist. I felt something soft go over my eyes, and I felt someone's warm breath blow on my neck. I slowly dozed off.

When I woke up I was in some type of pit looking thing. As I looked around I realized I was not in a pit. Up above me were lights and several people, mainly men, dressed in nice clothing. I was wearing some type of cloth boxers, or something to that extent. I could feel the adrenaline taking over my body. I looked behind me and saw another guy that seemed to be just waking up. He stood to his feet and began to charge towards me. Before I could react he slammed me to the ground.

"What are you—" before I could finish I felt something in my body change. I pushed the man off of me and punched him in the gut. I have never been a violent person, but at that

moment it was like someone had turned on some type of kill switch. The man and I fought for some time until I had beaten him so badly that he laid on the ground moaning. He had blood running out of his nose and had several bruises on his arms and ribs. I could feel myself slowly fading. I walked towards him to hit him once more, but before I could, I fell to the ground, and my body stiffened. My eyes were still alert but I felt like I had no control of my body. I watched two men walk into the place I was in. They picked up the man and drug him out of the rink. I could hear sounds of laughter, and the sound of coins being thrown around.

I heard someone say, "That'll be ten dollars, John."

Another man replied, "I need to start betting on the newbies from now on."

I heard several chuckles, and then I felt myself being picked up by two men. They drug me out of the rink and brought me into a cell. I laid there cold and in pain. After about an hour I was able to force myself to get up. To the right of me was a small cot. I hobbled over to it and sat on it. I looked at my aching body and saw all of the dark purple bruises. I felt something cold run down my lip. I put my hand to my lip and saw that my nose was bleeding. I pinched my nose and tilted my head back. After a while, the bleeding stopped, and I curled up into a ball. I was exhausted.

I began to wonder where I was, who took me, and what they put in me that made me so cruel. I began to think about the man I had fought with. He already had bruises before we had fought. I began to wonder how long he had been here. I wondered if there was any way out. How many other people were stuck? As I thought I began to drift off. Once I woke up, I was still lying on the cot, but I was surrounded by darkness. I tried to move, but once again realized I was tied. I saw a black figure standing in the doorway, and then all of a sudden bright white lights turned on throughout the room

that I was in. I saw a young lady with a clipboard walk in. She was a very beautiful woman. She was wearing a blue long-sleeve top with a long flowy beige-colored skirt. She wasn't wearing any makeup, from what I could tell, and had her hair pulled back into a messy ponytail. She entered the room without saying a word. The door closed behind her as she entered. She walked over to me and pulled out a needle.

"After I have injected this into you give it a few seconds and then please tell me how it makes you feel," she said, not making eye contact.

Before I could ask what it was, she injected the yellow substance into my body and took a step back. All of a sudden I felt it happening all over again. I felt like the kill switch had been turned back on, and I wasn't going to let anyone get in my way. I began to yell and try to break free from the ropes that kept me tied to the cot. She wrote a few things down on her clipboard and sat down. She sat watching me for about an hour when whatever it was seemed to wear off. I could feel my body start to crave whatever the yellow substance was. She got up, and I laid on the cot feeling weak. She looked at me and said, "I will see you tomorrow, Mr. James."

I didn't respond. I couldn't physically force myself to say anything.

I could feel my eyes fill up with tears. The yellow substance that they had injected into me made me feel horrible. My whole body ached, my head would spin, and my eyes felt like they would fog over. I became a completely different person.

For the next few days, I went through the same things. I would wake up in the darkroom, I would be injected and then brought into the rink. I would fight with the same man as before, and then I would wake up to the young lady who,

every time, would inject the yellow substance into me and say the same line. “I will see you tomorrow, Mr. James.”

As the days went on I could feel my body change. I began to crave the yellow substance, which I began calling monster juice, and my body would get weaker and weaker. My mindset began to change, and I would tell myself that I needed the monster juice to live. It became an addiction.

One day, however, I woke up and the lights were on, but the young lady who normally gave me my monster juice wasn't there. I looked around a bit frustrated because my body was craving it. I was about to yell for someone to come give me some when the door flew open. It slammed against the wall, and the young lady came running in. Her face looked pale and she looked horrified. She rushed over to my cot and began quickly untying the ropes that held me down. I was shocked at what she was doing.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I have to get you out of here,” she said. “What they have planned for you isn't safe. They have made a new liquid that we're supposed to inject into all of our patients. The liquid makes you do horrible things. They're called the 068 vaccines. They will inject it into you and once the substance is mixed with your blood there is no going back. You will turn into a fighting machine. You won't be able to control yourself ever. I have heard the screams of the patients it has been tried on. It hasn't been perfected until now, and the new formula is supposed to be tested on you.”

I looked at her with fear in my eyes, “How am I supposed to get out?” I asked.

“You can use the sewers,” she told me. “They will lead to a small river that is about 2.5 miles from here. Once you are there you need to run north as far as you can. You should be able to find a small town. Once you find the town you

need to tell the people what has been done to you, and you need to get them to help you stop these scientists.”

I rose to my feet and ran over to the vent. She helped me open it, and I followed it until I had made it down to the basement of the facility. I hopped out from the vent and opened a circular door that led to the sewers. I did exactly what the young lady told me to do, and I escaped. I ran until I could no longer feel my feet. They became cold and stiff. I collapsed to the ground and could feel my body begin to crave the yellow drug they injected into me. I closed my eyes and began to hope that I would learn to live without monster juice.

NONFICTION
Grades 11 & 12

Alisha Wong
Farmington, MN
1st Place

Who He Is(n't)

In Chinese culture, ever since the one-child policy, healthy baby boys were prized above girls—they could preserve the family's surname and bloodline, be head of the household, and protect and provide for their families. In turn, young girls should bleed elegance and femininity and intelligence.

However, it wasn't until I was older that I learned of these molds of perfect children. I never told a soul that my brother's childhood years were consumed by seizures and multitudes of hospital visits, not extracurricular prepping for his abundant achievements in academia.

Sometimes, I wondered if Deng Xiaoping took this into account.

On a certain day in preschool, we sit around in a circle as every student is asked how many members were in their immediate family. I assume it is an activity for the students to get to know their peers.

When my turn came around, my fingers wring themselves together. "Dad, mom, and two-year-old brother," I mumble.

"And what do you and your brother like to do?" my teacher queries. "Do you two like to play together?"

"No, I can't play with my brother. He can't walk or talk yet."

A flash of surprise enters her expression. "Oh, why can't he walk or talk yet?" I can detect the tinge of curiosity.

After several seconds of trying to find the correct response, I recite what my mother always told me when I, too, asked her why my brother couldn't do things.

“Because he's a late bloomer.”

When my new friends ask me who my first crush was, I tell them right from the top of my head: William.

I tell them William is the only son of a family friend from church and is also a golden and beautiful piano prodigy who, I swear, was performing in Carnegie Hall by age five. There are moments after service when I hear him practicing in one of the spare rooms with his mother. His back is steeled unbearably straight as his fingers dance across the black-and-white keys, rife with effortless virtuosity.

I recall the small lamp to the right that gives him enough light to read the notes, but from behind, his backlit form appears like any other child, and, at age seven, I see what my brother could have been.

My father offhandedly tells me most predators eat their offspring who are too weak or malformed to survive. He describes that nature's shortcomings are not to be felt by every other member.

My mother informs me that our family would not have survived in China, and if we did, we would be pitied beyond belief. With my father's lack of a university degree and my brother's Sturge-Weber Syndrome, there is no feasible way to cater and sustain our complexities.

His genetic abnormality forever transforms him into a person who is heavily dependent on the goodness of the people around him. His inability is not due to an absence of hard work or discipline or intelligence.

In this genetic game of chance, my placement on the hierarchy would be, by default, above his. I stare at my reflection—greasy hair, face stippled with zits, a hollowness carved in my perception—and I sense this heavy anchor of loss.

My eighth-grade class is standing in the library, choosing which book we will read and analyze for our mid-year book report. We're waiting in line to check out our books. I notice some of my peers are staring at me. I feel something twisting in my stomach.

"Wait, wait, wait, does Alisha have any siblings?" someone asks as my hands begin to perspire. I rack through my brain for a reply. I feel the room getting hotter and hotter, but my mouth is hinged shut. They're going to ask more, and I can't think of more answers to give them because I don't know how to—

"Yeah, she has a brother," a friend pipes up. My chest feels stretched. A couple of students' eyes widen in surprise.

A boy who sits diagonally from me laughs. "Oh, I bet he's at Harvard because he's Asian and all that." He claps his hands together in front of him and bows, imitating a karate instructor. "You Chinese are super smart."

For once, I don't want to correct the stereotype.

In Cantonese, my mother not-too-gently states that I'm ashamed of my brother.

"I am not embarrassed by him. He's my brother. I just don't talk about him very often," I contend.

"You are embarrassed. I can tell that you have no confidence when pushing his wheelchair or going out with

him in public.” Her chopsticks lift a scoop of rice into her mouth. “You care what people think too much.”

I shake my head, but if I peel back my denial, it reveals a desire for a normal family. I hear all about the lake days and cross-country road trips with the family, and I am innately resentful about what my family does not have.

“You’re like your father,” my mother continues, her voice clear and solid. “The reason your father has a harder time taking care of him is that he hasn’t fully accepted him yet. Your father still holds on to that familiarity for his age: retirement, paying off his debts, enjoying life till its end. You’re holding on now.”

That night, I reflect on her words and find myself scrolling through old photos of my brother and me that are saved in my *hidden album*.

The moments after I wake up from a dream, I sense the cavern. It’s a puncture, raw and deep. I hear its concave echoes, and I howl with it. I weep for all that I’ve lost and never gained. My lungs painfully bounce back-and-forth, attempting to release something cathartic. My tears stamp itself on my body, over and over and over again, but, in the meanwhile, also begin to fill its space.

In tenth grade, I meet a girl through a mutual friend of ours. It isn’t until her mother drives us to tennis practice that I realize she wheels her brother into the van on an automated ramp, similar to ours, and, for the first time, I feel something kindred.

We drive out to get coffee on a bright spring day, and we share our favorite spots to get oatmeal at the hospital and how *Me Before You* and *Wonder* will forever make us weep.

Our conversations establish a rapport, and there is a familiarity.

When I return home, my father is rigidly walking with him. I observe my brother lifting and dropping his legs. Up. Forward. Down. Up. Forward. Down.

Up—

I tell him to smile, snap a photo of him, and, in a new, uncertain tone, ask if I can walk with him.

—forward.

As the trees start to bleed red, I wrap him in his jacket, pack his essentials, and drive both of us to the mall at the busiest time of day. I roll him in and out of *Macy's*, weave him through the shelves in *Barnes and Noble*, and feed him his three syringes of formula at *Chipotle*. His therapist says new environments cheer him up and is beneficial for his brain.

While we're waiting for my frozen yogurt, a group of teenagers stare at him—at us—and my hands grow sweaty. I internally chant to myself that *they don't care* and *he is different, and that's okay* like a mantra.

We stay for another two hours.

My father, mother, and I sit at the dinner table with my brother being mouth-fed in his wheelchair.

After I applaud my brother for not spitting out half his mouthful, I abruptly ask about William and if he is still attending the Chinese church I grew up in.

My mother places her elbow on the table. "I don't think so. I think he left years ago, a little while after we left."

"What a shame. He must be so successful by now, an engineer or something equally as smart."

My father snorts.

My mother shrugs. “He better be. His parents were so hard on him growing up. His mom was a true Tiger Mom,” she informs me while using her chopsticks to seize a green bean. “I can’t even imagine how he is, now. Hopefully no mental or self-esteem issues. It’s hard growing up with such high expectations forced onto you.”

My eyes wander towards my brother, and I watch as his arms fly up to his head, elated and content. His teeth are spread apart, tilted, and asymmetrical, only revealing full gum when he laughs.

My hand finds his, and I trace his flesh, feeling his stiffened skin, gnarled from years of biting into it. I press my tongue into the inside of my cheek, reminding myself that he and I have this confusing, vast, profound identity rooted in how we construct ourselves.

For many moments, as my hollowness begins filling its rifts and the silhouettes of my imagination blur, I begin to see who he is.

Kate Janzen
Jackson, MN
2nd Place

Papa O

The world is full of troublemakers; like little boys that are so hyper they bounce off the walls. They then grow into teenagers who always have a smart-alec answer to get out of any trouble they got themselves into. Yet everyone still likes them because of their contagious enthusiasm and charming humor. My grandpa, who is lovingly referred to as Papa O, was one of these boys (my grandma would like to argue that he still IS one of these troublemakers). His stories about rotten eggs, hiding jackrabbits in the outhouse, and walking 14 miles in one night will never grow old; and there always seems to be another story hiding in the folds of his memory, just waiting to be told. Anyway, these few short stories from his growing up are a near perfect glimpse into his personality.

On April 26, 1952, in Huron, South Dakota, Edwin Tschetter and Alice Walter Tschetter gave birth to their first son and named him Orrin James Tschetter. The Tschetters were close with their extended relatives as they lived nearby. Nearly every holiday, celebration, or even on many Sunday afternoons after church, the Tschetters and their families would get together. On one of these occasions, Orrin's troublemaking shone through particularly strong.

There were four boy cousins that were Orrin's age, which, when they are all about seven years old, is a recipe for disaster. One afternoon they were playing outside. They found a nest full of rotten eggs, though they did not know they were rotten at the time. So, just as seven year old troublemaking boys would do, they decided to throw them

up onto the roof. *Crack! Crunch! Splat!* The sounds of the eggs cracking and splattering on the roof was shortly followed by the screams of little boys; “Ewwww! It’s on my head!” and “It’s covering my arms! Gross!” or “That stinks, I think I’m gonna puke!” Yes, the eggs were rotten. And, yes, the eggs had dripped off the roof right onto all of the troublemakers. Of course, the mothers all heard the squealing of the boys and came to see what the fuss was about. Orrin remembers that they were furious. In fact, Alice, his mother, brought a tub outside and made them each take a bath out in the middle of the yard. This is one of Orrin’s first clear memories of his troublemaking, and it is definitely not his last.

As a teen in the 1960s, popular music groups included the Beatles, Johnny Cash, and Orrin’s favorite, the Beach Boys. Bell bottom jeans were a popular fad. But as the rest of the nation was “getting groovy,” Orrin and his best troublemaking pal, Arvin, were busy making memories in the rural counties of South Dakota.

At this time it was illegal to hunt jackrabbits at night in South Dakota; it was simply too easy for a careless hunter to shoot livestock instead of the rabbit when it was so dark. Of course, the fact that this was illegal made doing it all the more exciting for teenage boys. Years later, this has provided many humorous stories for my Papa O to share with me and his eight other grandkids.

It was a chilly winter night. Orrin and Arvin were bundled up, ready to shoot some jackrabbits. They had thought up a seemingly brilliant idea; the Tschettters had an old, abandoned outhouse on the backside of their yard. Orrin and Arvin decided they could use that building as a storage unit for the jackrabbits they killed. It was perfect; the rabbits would freeze solid (because it was the dead of winter), and no one would know they were there (because no one ever

used that outhouse). Then, in the summer, they would simply sell the rabbits and make a profit. They both knew that if they got caught, they would have to answer to Alice Tschetter, who in the boys' opinions was much more frightening than the game warden.

Orrin and Arvin did not get caught that night, though, in retrospect, it may have been better for them if they had. They shot a whole lot of jackrabbits, piled them into the outhouse, and then went along to their usual troublemaking business. Flash forward a few months, to a beautiful day in late spring. Edwin Tschetter was, for some reason, walking past the old, abandoned outhouse on the edge of the property. For a second, the gentle breeze blew just strong enough to carry the potent scent from the outhouse to Edwin's nose. Immediately the sound "WHOO-EE!" exploded from his mouth as he covered his nose with his hanky and moved as quickly as possible away from the outhouse. He shook his head; he knew something was dead in there, and that the likely cause was his teenage troublemaker son. Hours later, Orrin and Arvin stood back and observed the now-empty outhouse. They looked at each other, their filthy overalls, and hanky-covered noses, and couldn't help but laugh. Without a doubt, this would be a long lasting memory.

This is not the only hunting story Papa O has shared. When he was a senior in high school, him and his friend, Jim Pratt (his future brother-in-law, actually), were once again hunting jackrabbits at night. They were driving along the road in a pickup and saw what they thought was a cop drive past. Knowing they were not supposed to be hunting and shouldn't get caught with guns, they threw their .22 rifles into the ditch and kept driving. Eventually, they made their way back to where they threw them. To find them, they parked the pickup so the headlights were shining into the ditch. This seemed to be a good idea, except they had to keep

driving the pickup forward to shine the light farther. At this point, two things happened. They found their guns, but the pickup was stuck. And they were seven miles from home.

After nearly two hours of walking, they were finally home. They quickly and quietly grabbed a tow rope and jumped in another pickup. Driving back to the “scene of the crime,” they backed up into the ditch and attached the rope to the hitch. The sound of spinning tires and the sight of dirt flying was not a good sign for the two exhausted teens. Lo and behold, the second pickup was stuck. And off they trekked into the night once again for another seven mile stroll. This time, they decided they would wait till morning to get the two pickups. Except when they finally got home, it was already six a.m. and the day on the farm was beginning. Orrin did not get any sleep that night, but in return he made a memory that would entertain his kids and grandchildren for years to come.

Just a few years later, Orrin stepped back and took a long look at the freshly painted sign that read “Orrin’s Garage, Est. 1972” that hung above the garage door of the shop. Although the farm had been in the family for generations, the fresh, crisp breeze that filled the air on that autumn morning and the fulfillment of finally opening his own mechanic garage made the shop feel new again. As he observed his newly founded business, he heard the crunch of gravel and the soft purr of a car motor behind him. Turning around, he was greeted by the friendly smile and wave of the first customer of Orrin’s Garage.

Now, Papa O and his wife, Grandma Jane, have been married for nearly forty-seven years. Although retired, Orrin still tinkers around at his garage and loves hunting. Despite the fact that he is much more cautious when hunting, Papa O’s mischievous personality shows through in other ways. As they say, once a troublemaker, always a troublemaker.

**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.

Last year we celebrated the 50th anniversary of Southwest Minnesota State University. We are proud to note that the Creating Spaces Writing Contest is now in its 15th 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 who score the submissions according to a rubric. Each submission is scored by multiple student judges. The works with the highest scores are 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 11th/12th 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 11th-12th 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

2021 Keynote Presenter: Shannon Gibney

Shannon Gibney is an award-winning author of books of all kinds—from novels to anthologies to essays to picture books. She writes for adults, children, and everyone in-between. Shannon’s books and writings have received many awards, and are taught in schools and communities around the country. She is a professor of English at Minneapolis College and also regularly teaches courses on writing craft at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, and has done workshops, readings, and residencies at schools ranging from Albion College, St. Catherine University, the University of Minnesota, Winona State University, Minneapolis Public Schools, Hennepin County Libraries, Ramsey County Libraries, and many others.

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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.

