

# **CREATING SPACES**

**2024**

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



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**Note to Readers:**

Some of the works in *Creating Spaces* may not be appropriate for a younger reading audience.



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# **POETRY**

## **Grades 3 & 4**



**Eleanor Schroeder  
Hutchinson**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

**Dance**

The mirrors,  
The bar,  
The music,  
My friends.

The pounding of our feet as we land a leap,  
The trickiness when we learn something new,  
The dizziness when we lose our balance,  
The excitement when we learn our routine.

The proud friends and family when we perform.  
That, and so much more, is what I love about dance.

**Maggie Keller  
Slayton**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

### **Sledding in July**

“You don’t sled in July,” my brother smugly declares.  
“Well, in the winter, I might get eaten by polar bears!”  
“We live in Minnesota. They don’t live here.”  
“Then if I don’t crash, I guess I’m in the clear!”  
He rolls his eyes and walks away.  
But I don’t care. I’m going sledding today!

**Maggie Keller  
Slayton**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

**A Tale of Two Seasons**

Wind howls  
Snow blows  
Frost on the windows  
Teddy bears  
Storybooks  
I snuggle up in my cozy nook  
Cuddle up in blankets and pillows  
Heaps of snow fall off the willows  
Flames burn down to cinder  
A sip of cocoa  
This is winter

Picnic blankets  
Soft wind blowing  
Nature's night-light fireflies glowing  
Rhubarb pie on the windowsill  
Cotton dresses with lace and frills  
The taste of honey  
The smell of grass  
Birds are chirping  
Summer at last



**FICTION**  
**Grades 3 & 4**





**Maggie Keller  
Slayton**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

### **The Sled**

My boots crunch through the icy layers of snow as I pull my sled up Big Bertha, the steepest hill on the golf course. Yesterday was sunny and mild, but the temperature plummeted last night, resulting in an icy crust on the snow and wildly fast hill speeds.

I reach the top as three thoughts reach my mind: I'm excited, I'm nervous, and I don't remember this hill being so terrifying! I cautiously position my sled on the sharply angled slope and straddle it while settling myself on top. Before I have a chance to reject going down the hill, my helpful older brother pulls my sled back and throws it forward! I'm off!

At first I'm enjoying the ride even though the bitter cold is biting at my face. I'm hurtling down the hill so fast that I don't register the huge bump up ahead! The scrape of my sled is suddenly silenced as I shoot up into the air! Time seems to slow as I realize this is not going to end well. I come crashing down on the frozen ground and hit like a bag of cement. As I slide to a stop, snow shoots into the cuffs of my mittens and the neck of my jacket like bullets. My cheek scrapes across the ice and, strangely enough, burns like it's on fire. My back is throbbing, and I can't seem to get any air into my lungs.

But that's not how my story ends.

I'm hurtling down the hill so fast that I don't register the huge bump up ahead! Suddenly, an enormous

white blur lunges out of the woods and charges toward the bottom of the hill. The monster is colossal, with long shaggy white fur, great gray tusks on the top of its head, and muscular arms and legs. It's a Yeti! Stomping his huge feet, he smashes the bump until it's flatter than the ground in front of it. He seems to smile in his own toothy, Yeti way as he ambles back into the forest while my sled glides to a stop.

But that's not how my story ends.

I'm hurtling down the hill so fast that I don't register the huge bump up ahead! The scrape of my sled is suddenly silenced as I shoot up into the air! Time seems to slow as I realize this is not going to end well. I desperately grasp my coat sleeve and yank it up upward to reveal my magic watch. I tap the glass face and everything freezes. Birds are motionless in the sky, the wind ceases, flags are at a standstill, my brother is a statue, my sled hovers in the air three feet above the ground. I shift to the side and jump down to the snow.

But that's not how my story ends.

I'm hurtling down the hill so fast that I don't register the huge bump up ahead! The scrape of my sled is suddenly silenced as I shoot up into the air! Time seems to slow as I realize this is not going to end well. I reach forward to the front of my sled and press the emergency heart-shaped button. Rainbow-colored wings extend from both sides of my sled, catching the wind. I soar upward into the clear blue winter sky.

That's how my story ends and a new story begins.

## **Bryce Metzger Hills**

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

#### **What a Day**

On one bright, sunny day at school, I was just about to have Social Studies. Oh wait, let me introduce myself. My name is Bryce, I am in third grade, and I am very – and I mean *very* – excited for Social Studies today, because we made ecosystems for a school project. We are all excited. My friends Mallorie, Londyn, Maddox, Elise, and Henry are so excited to share our ecosystems! Mallorie had the desert, Londyn had the tundra, Maddox freshwater, Elise the ocean, Henry woodlands, and I had the grasslands.

It was five minutes until Social Studies, and we were in math. I was sitting next to Londyn and I whispered to her, “Londyn, are you ready for Social Studies?”

“Yes!” said Londyn. “My tundra is awesome and I cannot wait to show everybody!”

Just then came the voice of our teacher, Mr. VanWyhe. “628 plus 729 equals what?”

I shouted, “1,357.”

“Right on, Bryce!” said Mr. VanWyhe. Then it was time for Social Studies. “Everyone get prepared to show your ecosystems,” said Mr. VanWyhe.

We all gathered our ecosystems and brought them to the carpet. Everybody shared their ecosystems and Mr. VanWyhe said they were all wonderful.

After school, my friends and I stayed to test our science experiment. It was a chemical reaction. We added all the

ingredients, and we thought the experiment was going great. Everyone was cleaning up – when all of a sudden the room started to shake.

“What's happening?” asked Mallorie.

“I think there is an earthquake?” said Henry.

“Or a tornado?” said Elise.

We all fell to the ground.

“Where are we?” gasped Londyn.

“I think the chemical reaction caused this,” I said. “It is so mucky and humid. There are also many lakes and creeks.”

“Guys, I know where we are,” said Maddox. “I think we are in my freshwater ecosystem.”

“Okay, I believe you, but how do we get out of here?” I asked.

“I think we could try to find the end of the freshwater ecosystem and maybe we could find a way to get out of here,” said Elise.

“Okay, but this is going to be like Maddox’s ecosystem, so we need to get some information about it,” I said.

“Maddox, what are some things in the freshwater ecosystem?” asked Henry.

“There are lots of things in the freshwater ecosystem. There are alligators, water moccasins and sturgeons. Things we shouldn’t be worried about,” said Maddox sarcastically.

At the back of the pack, Mallorie and Elise were shivering with a look of fear in their eyes. “What other things are there that don’t sound scary?” asked Elise.

“There are frogs, algae, lily pads, and fish,” said Maddox.

“What a relief!” sighed Elise.

So they all went to explore the freshwater ecosystem. Soon they came to a big stream full of water.

“How do we cross the water?” asked Mallorie.

“There are logs that we could jump across,” suggested Londyn.

“Okay, but we have to make sure they are steady,” I said. We all stepped on the logs.

“I think they are pretty steady to me,” said Henry. So we crossed the logs to get to the other side of the stream.

Maddox was the last to come. He was just about to step on a goofy looking log when Elise stopped him and cried “Maddox, that's not a log!”

“Then what is it?” asked Maddox.

“I don’t want to tell you, but I think it is one of those water monsters you mentioned earlier,” Elise screamed.

“It might be an alligator. Jump! Maddox, jump!” yelled Henry.

“I can’t look,” Mallorie said. Mallorie closed her eyes in fear, and Maddox took a big leap. The alligator opened his jaws big and wide, waiting for a tasty meal, but Maddox barely cleared the alligator’s big, sharp teeth. “I made it,” Maddox yelled! Mallorie opened her eyes and was surprised to see that Maddox was still alive.

“I think we made it to the end of the ecosystem,” said Henry.

“How can you tell?” asked Elise. Everyone looked up and saw what Henry was looking at. There standing right in front of the kids was a huge portal. A portal is a big purple circle that takes you to different parts of the world.

“This is it,” said Londyn.

“Now it is time to go back home,” said Mallorie. “I have had enough adventure for one day and I miss my family.”

Then we all closed our eyes and stepped through the portal. I thought we were home until I noticed it was really, really, hot – much hotter than it is where we live. “Guys, I

don't think we made it home, and it is scorching hot out here," I said.

"Do you think we are in the desert ecosystem?" suggested Maddox. Everyone knew that had to be totally true.

"Hey, that's my ecosystem," said Mallorie. "I know all about it. I bet I could help you through it."

"I hope so," said Maddox. "I don't want to have to risk my life like that again."

"But why aren't we back home?" wondered Londyn.

"Maybe we have to go through all of the ecosystems," I said. They all thought that could be true.

"We should find the portal for this one then," said Elise. While we were all discussing, Mallorie already was on her way to find the next portal.

"C'mon guys adventure awaits," she said. So, we started walking through the hot, dry desert to find the next portal.

"Mallorie," asked Henry, "what are some things in the desert ecosystem that we should be aware of, like creatures and wildlife?"

"There are lots of things in the desert ecosystem like lizards, camels, cacti, and lots of sand. I mean lots of sand," she said. So the kids set off to find the end of the ecosystem again.

"Hey guys, I see something up ahead," said Londyn. It was a beautiful looking camel, right in front of them. It was alone and stranded in the sand in the middle of the desert ecosystem.

"Maybe we could take it with us to where we're heading?" I suggested. We gathered the camel and took it with us.

"I hope we can get out of here soon. I'm starving," said Elise.

“Guys, does anybody else feel like it is getting colder here?” asked Maddox.

“I do,” Londyn said.

“Guys, I don’t think I told you this before, but I think there is a sandstorm coming our way,” said Mallorie. Tiny bits of sand started to blow into our faces.

“We need to find shelter as fast as possible,” yelled Henry. We ran to find shelter, but we had no luck at all. Suddenly we found a tiny cave in the middle of nowhere.

We all stayed there until the sandstorm passed us completely.

“Finally that terrible sandstorm is over,” said Elise. “I have sand on myself everywhere and I don’t like it at all.”

“I know, I’m covered in sand too,” I said.

“I need some water,” said Londyn. “I’m so thirsty.”

When they turned around and looked at the cave there was a portal in it. “Guys I think we found the next portal,” said Mallorie.

“Guys, we also found the camel’s family,” said Maddox excitedly. Sure enough, inside the cave was huddled a family of camels trying to escape the storm. We led the camel to its family and stepped through the portal on our way to the next ecosystem.

The next ecosystem found us on a deserted island for some reason. “What ecosystem are we in now?” Henry asked. Everyone tried to think.

“Guys I got it,” said Elise. “We are in the ecosystem that is all around us – the ocean ecosystem.”

“That could be,” I said. “We are surrounded by water and on a deserted island so I think Elise is right. But, how do we get to the portal underwater?”

“Hey guys I found some scuba gear over here,” said Mallorie. We put the gear on and headed toward the water. Splash! We dove in the water and started looking underwater

for a purple portal. “Elise, what things are there in the ocean ecosystem?” Londyn asked.

“There are lots of things like sharks, dolphins, manatees, fish, coral reefs, and sea anemone,” said Elise.

“That’s a lot of things in the ocean,” Maddox said. “I sure wouldn’t like to run into a shark.”

The kids kept swimming around trying to find the portal.

“I hear something coming our way,” I said.

“Is it a shark?” asked a frightened Maddox.

“No, it’s a baby seal,” said Henry.

“Aww,” said Elise and Londyn together, admiring the cute looking seal.

“Bark! Bark!” said the seal.

“What’s wrong, cutie?” asked Londyn.

“Uh, Londyn, you better turn around,” Mallorie said.

Londyn turned around and saw some big teeth and a big creature that looked like a – “SHARK!” screamed Maddox. We swam as fast as we could to get away from the shark, but the shark was too fast and we were getting tired.

“Bark! Bark!” said the seal.

“I think he wants us to follow him,” Henry said. We followed the seal to its home where the shark couldn’t get us. It was dark but it was safe enough. We waited until the shark was gone.

“Guys, where are we?” I exclaimed.

“I think we are in a seal garden,” said Elise, amazed.

“I never thought a seal garden was so beautiful,” Mallorie said.

Everywhere you could see plants that would protect you from any type of danger. “Bark! Bark!” said the seal.

“There is the baby seal’s family,” said Londyn.

“Guys, they are blocking something behind them,” added Maddox. “It’s the portal.”



We swam over to the portal. Elise gave the seal a hug for saving us and helping us find the portal.

Then we entered the portal. When we stepped out of the portal, all we could see was trees. Trees and more trees. Right away Henry knew just where we were. “Guys, we are in the woodland ecosystem,” said Henry.

“Of course you would know that,” Mallorie said. “It's your ecosystem.”

We began making our way through the trees. “I hope we get out of here without anything disastrous going on,” I said.

“All I can see here are trees, only trees,” said Maddox.

“Henry, what things are in the woodland ecosystem?” asked Elise.

“There are deer, foxes, mushrooms, and lots and lots of trees,” said Henry.

“Okay,” said Londyn, “but is there anything else disastrous that could happen?”

“Well a forest fire could happen, but there is only a small percent chance that will happen,” said Henry.

“Well I hope that doesn't happen,” said Elise. We kept trudging forward through the woodland forest.

When we stopped, we all smelled something like smoke.

“Guys I don't want to say this, but I think a forest fire is going on right now,” said Henry nervously.

“I see somebody in the distance,” Mallorie said.

“We need to save him,” I said.

“Okay, let's go fast, because I'm not getting burned to ashes,” said Maddox. We went to save the guy by the forest fire. As we walked up to him, we saw it was Smokey the Bear.

“Hi, ya guys, what are you doing in the middle of a forest fire?” he asked.

“Hi Smokey, we got transported here from a portal,” said Londyn. “What are you doing here?”

“I heard there was a forest fire in the area and I came running over as fast as I could. I also heard animals were trapped in the fire not knowing how to get out of their homes because they were scared.”

“We have to help them,” I said.

“Let's go,” Smokey replied.

We all found an animal to rescue. I found a baby fox to help. We saved the rest of the animals and ran from the forest fire. We made it out, but everything was burned down to ashes. “Smokey, what's going to happen to those trees?” asked Elise. “Is this area of land going to be empty forever?”

“No,” Smokey said. “We will plant new trees to replace the ones that burned down.”

“Guys, it's getting darker, we need to keep moving,” Henry said.

“Okay,” said Mallorie, “but we need to find the portal first.”

Maddox said, “Guys, I see a purple thing in the distance.”

We all ran as fast as we could to get to the portal in the distance. There it was. Right in front of the portal we were all ready to go home, thinking about how our parents were probably worrying about us. We stepped in and it was really cold when we stepped out the other side.

“Where are we?” wondered Elise coldly.

“I know where we are,” said Londyn. “We are in the tundra ecosystem.”

“Well, that was easy, because it's freezing cold out here,” said Henry.

“Let's hurry to get out of here,” Maddox said. “I'm freezing my toes off.”

“Londyn, what's in the tundra ecosystem that we should need to know?” I asked.

“There are millions of things in the tundra ecosystem like polar bears, penguins, seals, leopard sharks and, as you can see, snow!” Londyn said.

“Hopefully nothing disastrous happens so we can get out of here fast,” Mallorie said.

“Okay let's go before I get frostbite,” Maddox said. We went out into the cold, snowy tundra. As we were walking we heard some rumbling coming from the mountains in the east. We saw something coming down the mountain – and coming fast.

“Oh no, guys I think there is an avalanche happening right now and we need to take cover,” yelled Londyn.

“Hey wait, guys, I see a family of polar bears and they are right under the avalanche,” I said. “We need to save them from dying.”

“Okay let's go save them,” Mallorie said. We ran over there to save the polar bear family. We each grabbed a cub and the parents ran to safety. We found shelter and stayed there until the avalanche was over. All that time all you could hear was rumble, rumble, rumble. Finally, the avalanche was over and we headed out of our shelter.

“That was scary,” said Elise in a shaky voice.

“I hope that never happens again,” said Henry.

Soon the polar bear family started to go away. We said bye to them and they disappeared into the cold, harsh tundra. We saw something purple sticking out of the snow from the avalanche. “It's the portal,” Maddox said excitedly.

“Let's go through the portal as fast as we can because I'm freezing from head to toe,” Mallorie said.

“Okay,” I said. We stepped through the portal and we all knew what ecosystem it was. It was the grassland

ecosystem. "I think this is our last ecosystem," said Londyn excitedly.

"Bryce, what things are in the grassland ecosystem?" asked Elise.

"There are lots of things like lions, giraffes, zebras and grass as you can see," I said.

"Is there anything bad that could happen in this ecosystem?" asked Henry.

"I hope not," I said. "I don't think it would be that serious if there were any disastrous things going on."

"Okay," replied Henry. "I just want to get home to my family"

"We all do," Maddox said. We bravely ventured onward to see where the portal was. As we all kept trudging through the grassland ecosystem, we heard an unfamiliar sound. "What is that sound?" asked Londyn.

"It sounds horrible and annoying," Mallorie said.

"Guys I don't know what that sound this is, but I know what animal is making it," I said. "It's a giraffe."

"I don't know what noise giraffes actually make because they are rarely heard making noises," I said.

"Roar!"

"What was that?" Elise wondered.

"I think that was a lion," I said.

"I knew there was going to be a disastrous thing going on," said Henry.

We all looked around to see where a lion was. We didn't see any lions around here anywhere and we were starting to get worried. "ROAR!" The lion jumped right in front of us.

"Ahhhhh," Mallorie screamed.

"Run!" yelled Maddox.

We all ran as fast as we could from the lion.

“I hope that the lion goes away soon,” said Henry. “My legs are getting tired.”

“We need to find food for the lion,” said Londyn.

“I found a dead animal. Do you think that would work?” I said.

“I hope so,” said Elise. The lion smelled the dead animal, picked it up and ran away as fast as he could.

“Yay!” we all said joyfully. Everyone cheered and clapped their hands as hard as they could.

“Guys, our adventure is not over yet,” Maddox said.

We still need to find the portal to home. We all saw something purple in the distance and went running toward it. “I see it, I see the portal,” said Mallorie excitedly.

We ran toward the portal until we were right up close to it. “I am so excited to go back home,” said Elise, full of joy.

We all stepped through the portal and there was our classroom with the police and our parents in the room. They were all worried sick. “We are so happy you made it home,” said our parents together. Some of the parents were crying happy tears. We all hugged our families and went to our cars.

“So, what did you do and where did you go?” my parents asked kindly. Then I told them the whole story. They told me I had a really good imagination and said, “What did you *really* do at school today?”

I smiled, and soon we were driving away from our school and headed toward home.

**Londyn DeBoer**  
**Hills**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

**Unexpected Surprise**

Hey, you – yeah, you! Get over here. Have you ever had a time when you were just so bored and had nothing to do?

This is something that has happened to me. It's even crazier than you would think it would be.

It started like any ordinary day. I was sitting on my sofa. My dad and my older brother were going to go get some furniture because we just moved here and our house needs some updated things. Anyway, my mom suggested that I could unpack a bit more, so I went up to my room, and as I was going up my stairs they made a screeching noise the whole way up the stairs. It sounded like this:  
*scrreeeechhhhhccchhhhcchheeeeyyyyyy.*

When I was unpacking, I opened my closet and inside, it looked like a dumbwaiter. Readers, if you have never heard of a dumbwaiter before, it is a thing that helped people in the olden days to transfer things from down below to high up. Now back to the story; we left off at the part where I saw the dumbwaiter in my closet and I never thought I would ever see one in my closet. *Hmmm, should I go down it?* It looked creepy and weird but at the same time exciting. *I'm going down it.*

When I was going down it, I felt like I could hear glitching sounds all around me and I felt a glitch too. Then when at the bottom there was a magical door – well, it looked like a magical door. *I am going to see what is behind this marvelous door.* When I opened the door I saw fairies,

goblins, mystical creatures, woodland animals, and even more things that were too hard to explain. Then a fairy came up to me and said, "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I am all right," I replied anxiously.

"Ok, good, um, are you new here?" asked the fairy.

"Yes, I am, but why are you wondering?"

"I am the greeter here and welcome all the people who come here and sometimes use a bit of magic on them, but don't be worried, it won't harm you. It's magic people like," said the fairy. "Do you want me to do some magic on you?"

"Depends on what it is," I said wondering what she meant by that.

"I mean that if anyone comes here and stays for a while and I was wondering if you wanted to be a fairy, goblin or animal or something. So what do you want to be?"

"Me? I want to be a fairy."

"All right then, let me work my magic."

"First, what is your name?" I asked.

"Suzie."

"All right then Suzie, um, my name is Victoria."

"Okay then, let's do this."

Then she waved her magical wand and suddenly, **I was a mystical fairy.**

My now pink and lavender hair was in a bun, I had teal wings, a baby blue dress, and best of all I had two glass slippers and also a magic wand. When I saw myself, I thought I was in a fairy tale.

"Wait!" I said. "I need to get back home!"

I was worried as can be.

"Oh, there is only one way to go back and that way is to go on a quest to find the KEY OF POWER. It will take a mighty and noble person to do this job. You will have to go through four different lands or islands. One of them is the Goblin Almighty Island where you have to fight the

goblins... and be careful, they are very persuasive goblins. Also, there is one called Puppy Palace, but don't get distracted by their adorableness. Another one is Icebergopia – just a reminder, be careful, the icebergs could break at any time. And last, but not least, Evil Unicorn Island, and those unicorns can be very ferocious.”

That is a bunch of information, I thought. Then Suzie used her wand and made a weird looking portal that had so many colors. She said, “Step into it and you will be into the first stage to find the KEY OF POWER, and also you have to find a key at each place to unlock a door to the next stage. Now, good luck.”

I had no choice. I stepped into the portal.

The island was magnificent, but it looked so crazy. A goblin can up to me and asked me if would like an apple that will turn me into a frog forever, which could be helpful any day or time that might come. *Wait, I know what he is trying to do. Suzie said that they can be very persuasive.* I said, “No thanks, I'm good.”

I asked the goblin, “Do you know where to find the first key to unlock a door to the next stage to find the KEY OF POWER?”

He just walked away and said “Bye now.”

Then I yelled, “Thanks for the help.” I was being sarcastic.

*Wait, why can't I just use my wand and say to go to the next stage? I'm going to try to do it.* I waved my wand and I was at Puppy Palace. Then I thought, can't I just do that again? So, I waved my wand, and nothing happened, I was still there. *Maybe I can only do it one time.* Soon I was walking around and seeing so many adorable puppies, but I remembered that I needed to stay focused. I asked a puppy, “Do you know where to find the KEY OF POWER or the second key to go to the next stage?”



The puppy said, “Yes, I do. You need to go into the Puppy Forest and find the most elderly dog that lives in the forest. Oh, and here is a map that will help you find him. Good luck.”

Then the quest began.

*I want to go find that dog and return home as soon as possible. I need a nap because this has all been exhausting. But right now, onward to Puppy Forest.* There were so many paths that were very twisty and kind of made me nauseous. Soon I saw a tiny village that looked like a fairy garden, but instead of fairies, there were puppies and dogs. Once I got closer, I saw a very old house.

It was rusty. The grass was overgrown. It looked like the oldest house in the village. Then I thought, *maybe that could be where the old dog lives.* So, I went up to the door and knocked. The door opened and made a super loud screeching noise like my stairs do in my new house. It was an old dog with a cane and suspenders. I asked him, “Are you the oldest dog in Puppy Palace?”

“Yes, yes I am,” he replied. “Are you trying to find the KEY OF POWER and needing to find a key to Icebergtopia?”

“Yes I am.”

“Well, here is the key to Icebergtopia.”

“Thank you very much!” I replied.

When he gave me the key, a door came up, which I quickly unlocked with the key and I was in Icebergtopia. I saw penguins, polar bears, arctic foxes, arctic hares, walruses, seals, and what looked like orcas and other sea creatures in the ocean. It was so cold that I was shivering. I quickly pulled out my magic wand. I waved it, and I became a winter fairy. I had a winter jacket and leggings, and they were both magenta with a little bit of fuchsia and baby blue.

A penguin walked past me, and I swiftly ran up to her and asked, “Do you know where to find the key to go to the next stage to find the KEY OF POWER?”

“No, but follow me and I’ll show you,” she replied. We got to an igloo and she said, “Here is the person that can help you.”

“Thank you.” I replied. I knocked on the door and a few seconds later it opened and there was a penguin who said, “How may I help you? Wait, are you trying to find the KEY OF POWER?”

“Yes, I am. How did you know that?”

“I have a bunch of people come here to ask me about it, and how to get to the next stage. And here is how you get there. You must go by the water and say, ‘to the next stage, here I go.’ Now, good luck. Oh and the water is to the east and it is not too far away and again, good luck.”

Soon after, I was heading east, and I saw the water. Then I said what he said: “To the next stage, here I go.” Icebergs started to rise up from the water

Out of nowhere a word appeared in the air. It said START. So, I pressed start.

The words changed to Ready, Set, Go. I didn’t know what to do, but then I remembered that Suzie warned me to be careful of icebergs that might break or something like that. I figured I needed to jump on them. So I jumped on the first iceberg.

Then I jumped one-by-one on to other icebergs. Once I almost fell in the water because it was cracking a bit. Soon I was done, and I got a key. Like last time, a door appeared, and I unlocked it with the key. I opened the door and was at Evil Unicorn Island. It was nothing like I thought it would be. It was dark and shallow, but peaceful in a dark way. I noticed up ahead there was a valley that was very bright and joyful, and there was a rainbow but only in that valley. I

thought, maybe I should go over there and see what is going on. It was a long way over there, with so many mountains to walk across. When I finally got to the valley, I saw unicorns. *Wow, Suzie was right, they look very ferocious.* When one unicorn saw me, he shouted, “HUMAN!”

He came up to me and said, “Are you trying to find the KEY OF POWER?”

“Yes, I am,” I replied anxiously.

“Okay then. How you finish this last stage is that there will be five unicorns to fight: Unicorn, Super Unicorn, Ultra Super Unicorn, Mega Unicorn, and the hardest one, Triple Mega Unicorn. Are you ready?”

“Yes – well, I think so.”

“I’ll get the unicorns ready, and you fight in an hour. You will need to use your magic wand for this event. I’ll see you in a little while. Bye now.”

“Bye too.” *I hope this will go well,* I thought.

That hour went by fast, and soon it was go time. The unicorns assembled and I had to fight the first unicorn. One said, “Ready, Set, Go!” The unicorns shot marshmallows out of their horns. I had to use my wand and block them so they wouldn’t hit me. When they did, it hurt more than you would think. Then I was done with the first one. *That was exhausting, I wonder how hard the next four will be.* The Super Unicorn was extreme, but I got through it.

The next one was Ultra Super Unicorn. But again, I got through it. Mega Unicorn was very, very extreme. I barely got through it. Finally, I was at the last unicorn. I was so worn out – exhausted and tired. But I needed to find the KEY OF POWER. I tried and tried and fought so hard.

I made it through the last unicorn. I got the KEY OF POWER! When I got it, I unlocked the door, as usual. Soon I heard a voice from nowhere say, “Congratulations!”

I was so relieved and then a keyboard popped out and said type a town or city. So, I typed Chicago, then I was home, and right away, like I said I would, I took a nap. I was home at last.

**POETRY**  
**Grades 5 & 6**



**Penni Moore**  
**Hills**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

**Nothing**

Is silence truly nothing,  
 Or is it a sound that is silence?  
 In a black void of darkness,  
 Is that truly nothing?  
 Or is it something, unbeknownst to the eye?

Nothing is an odd word,  
 Like, I have nothing to do  
 Even though I'm sure there's something  
 Maybe not with you

A box that is empty  
 But is it nothing?  
 Or is it still a box?

Is the word nothing  
 Simply meant to play with your mind?  
 Or is it something,  
 Just without a fine line?

Nothing is nothing,  
 But there's always something  
 That can change the word nothing  
 Into a something.

**Owen Rheinheimer  
Prinsburg**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

**Ice Hockey**

The evoking  
of a poem,

it's like  
smoothly

skating  
with

a  
puck

that's being  
passed up the  
ice.

A rhyme that  
sounds so crisp,

like a blade that  
cuts into the ice.

The emotions  
that show

everywhere  
every poet  
scores a goal.



**Robert Keller  
Slayton**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

**A Valentine to My Fridge**

The tallest in my family  
She has a hefty build  
It's what's on the inside that counts  
She hums a sweet tune  
Her alabaster skin smooth and cool  
I open her door and stare for hours  
While my parents grumble about electricity  
Every time I get home she purrs hello  
My stomach growls HUNGRY



**FICTION**  
**Grades 5 & 6**



**Rebekah Westby  
Spicer**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

**Fixing the Past**

I had imagined this moment many times before, but now, in the moment, it was as clear as a crystal. My long, white dress spread out behind me, and I was ready to walk down the aisle. I was nervous, but very excited at the same time.

The beautiful organ started, signaling that it was my time to start walking. The doors opened, and I got my first view of my soon-to-be husband. I took my first steps and with each one, I got more courage. I made it to the end, and my fiancé took my hand. He looked up and down my body, taking in every inch of me.

“You look breathtaking,” he whispered. I smiled and walked with him to the priest. The priest started the sermon, and I listened to every word.

“Now, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

He leaned in to kiss me, and just as his lips were centimeters from mine, a frantic voice ran out.

“No! Don’t! Gen! No!”

My curiosity got the better of me, and I whipped around wondering who it was. It gave me away. Shoot! There he was, Kim Seong-Su, running down the aisle, about to ruin this moment. I stood up straighter.

“Who are you?” I asked as he got closer.

He laughed and I tried not to give myself away any more than I did.

“Haha. ‘Who are you?’ Hilarious. I knew you would say that.”

I looked around to see if anyone was looking at me funny. They were. My fiancé, Luke, was looking at me like he was about to explode with questions that I wouldn’t answer right away.

“Do I need to explain? Fine, I’ll humiliate you in front of all these people who have no idea who you really are,” he told me threateningly.

I laughed, hoping that no one else would notice how nervous I was.

“Who I really am? My name is Annika Benjamin, about to be a Levi. Now, who are you, and why are you crashing my wedding?”

“I do suppose I am crashing your wedding. But! Have you told him yet? That your real name is-”

His words were cut off by me sprinting towards him and slapping my hand over his mouth. All around me, people gasped. I realized that this was probably the worst thing that I could’ve done to hide my real identity.

I chuckled nervously. I turned to Luke.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know who this is, but I need to escort him out. Excuse me.”

His jaw dropped and I smiled tightly. I pushed him out and slammed the door behind me. The lobby was empty, but I couldn’t take any chances, so I pulled him out of the church and across the street. I muttered curses under my breath.

“Why the heck are you here?”

He smiled back smugly.

“I came back to get you.”

“So, you went across the world to get me?”

He nodded.

“Well, let’s hear it.”

“Hear what?”

“Why are you trying to stop me from getting married?”

“So you won’t get hurt.”

“Get hurt from what?”

“Genesis!”

It felt so weird to have someone call me by my first name. I hadn’t heard it in a while.

“Did you not think about the consequences of what would happen if you were caught?” he said.

“I’m pretty sure I just was! That was the least subtle thing you could ever do!”

“Okay... that wasn’t very subtle, I’ll admit, but now you won’t be hurt as badly. You don’t even love him.”

I scoffed. “You don’t know that! What if I do love him? What will you do about that? I didn’t leave Korea for you to come back and get me! It was hard enough to escape, and now you’re here to take me back? Never.”

“Okay. We won’t go back, but at least change your strategy. Trying to get a man for his money and trying to be loved? Maybe he did love you. What did you do with that love? You tucked it away! You knew he loved you! You said you loved him!”

“Wait, how did you know that?”

If he heard my question, he ignored it and kept going.

“When you said you loved him, you weren’t sincere. I could hear it. If he did, he ignored it. All you wanted was to be loved just to throw it away. You didn’t care and still don’t!”

I was quiet. I breathed in sharp breaths and my fists were clenched so tight, that my knuckles turned white.

“That. Is. Not. True. I love him! I do! Sure, at the beginning I didn’t. Maybe I just wanted to feel loved because I never was! Have you ever felt that way? No! You grew up with loving parents who didn’t abandon you. They tucked you in every night. I didn’t have that. I was thrown on the streets. I slept in a box in an alleyway. I didn’t have food. I starved. Our leader never changed anything! He let people starve and made sure that they would never be wealthy. Your life was perfect.”

“No, it wasn’t! We both grew up in North Korea. North Korea is far from perfect. Sure, it has its beautiful moments, but it was never perfect. My parents were addicts! They smuggled goods and liquor in from China. They made a profit off smuggled goods. When they tucked me in, they secretly whispered threats in my ear. They told me that if I wasn’t the perfect child they imagined, they would do things that my little four-year-old mind couldn’t understand. You never knew that side. You don’t know at all what my life was like. You only saw the outside. I watched you escape. I watched you live your life peacefully in China. While you ‘actually’ lived, I was suffering. After you left, I dreamed of being like you. I admire your bravery. Even though we were friends, you never told me what you were up to. I left when I was nineteen. I couldn’t handle it. I set off and made it my goal to find you. Finally, I did. But, what did I hear? You were getting married. No. That’s not the Genesis Lee I know. She wouldn’t do that. So, that’s why you’re doing it? To actually feel what it’s like to live?”

I took in his words. I didn’t know that that was what he was going through. I didn’t know he was suffering. If I did know, I would’ve taken him with me. I wouldn’t have left without him. Without any words, I hugged him. I hugged him tightly. He was hesitant but hugged me back. We stood there for a while. When I let go, I also noticed that people



were starting to come out of the building to see what was going on.

“I have a few hundred questions for you,” he told me.

“I do too.”

“Well, let’s start with, do you love him?”

“Luke?”

Did I really? I thought of all the things we had been through. Did I?

“Yes,” I said confidently. “I do.”

He held my hands in a friendly gesture.

“Good. I approve.”

“You’re still my best friend. You know that, right?”

“Now I do.”

“Great. But now, I have to get back to my wedding that you crashed.”

“Oops. Sorry.”

I waved goodbye and walked back to the church.

Most of the people were still there. I ran down the aisle and straight to Luke. I resumed right where we left off. I grabbed his hand and pulled him down to me. He was surprised by the kiss but didn’t pull back. When we broke off, he looked at me funny.

“I know,” I said, “I’ll explain later. But, first, can we be a married couple?”

“Hmm. That depends on what you tell me later.”

He smiled and I laughed.

“Yes, sir.”

After the reception, he carried me into our house. He set me down on the couch.

“Okay, I have waited six hours for you to tell me what happened. I am so confused, and don’t know if I should trust you or not.”

I was tipsy from the champagne and couldn't quite think straight.

"Why did you marry me then?"

"I had to do something, or else my mother would not be pleased. Now, can you talk?"

"Now? I'm tired and drunk."

I crawled to him and laid my head on his shoulder.

"What about tomorrow?" I asked.

"Tomorrow, we leave for our honeymoon. We need to talk now."

"While I'm drunk?"

"I know your drinking habits. You're honest when you're drunk."

"Fine. The person at the wedding was Kim Seong-Su. He was my best friend. He still is. There are things that you don't know about, and I hope that you won't get mad at me and you won't explode."

He nodded and I continued.

"I grew up in North Korea. You see the resemblance, right?"

"I knew you were Asian, but I didn't know you grew up there."

"Huh. Well, yeah, I grew up there. I didn't have loving parents growing up. In fact, the parents I did have were on the other side of the city from where I was. I lived on the streets. It was very cold. But, I won't go into detail about that. I left when I was sixteen for China. I got a job, I lived fine there. Then when I was eighteen, I left China for the US. It took forever. Like, I'm not even kidding. It took like 14 hours to fly. I've lived here for three years now. I met you and fell in love. I left my best friend because I was sure he was having a perfect life back there. He wasn't. Now that I've seen him after five years. I know. I originally came to the US with a plan. Get a man with money, fall in love, get

married, then live happily ever after. I'll be loved, I thought. Man, this is tiring. Can you get me some water?"

He nodded and went into the kitchen. He came back a couple of minutes later with a cup of water. I drank the whole cup and then got back to my story.

"I didn't mean to fall in love, I just did. Anyway, Seong-Su found me. He warned me that if I got caught, I would get hurt. I don't know about you, but that was the least subtle thing that he could ever do. Because of him, my story is leaked. Take that, Seong-Su! I don't care! At least my story isn't a secret anymore."

"Uh-huh," he said, still skeptical. "What was the thing about the name thing? He called you 'Gen'."

"Oh, right. I changed my name after I came to the US. It was Genesis Lee. After I came, I changed it to Annika Benjamin."

"So, he's not a threat?"

"Threat to what?"

He smiled.

"To let me love you."

"You're still going to marry me?"

His smile spread from ear to ear.

"Technically, we already are."

"That's true. But you're not ashamed or angry?"

"No. But, I do have one question. Is anyone looking for you? Like, the police or the FBI?"

"Probably the North Korean Army, but I'm sure we'll be fine."

"Great."

The honeymoon was awesome! We went on a cruise to Mexico. It was amazing. Anyway, we got back late at night, three weeks later. Luke wanted to stay a long time.

When we got back, Seong-Su was waiting for us on the front step. He was clutching his legs and he looked frantic.

“Seong-Su? What are you doing?” I asked him.

His head perked up and his eyes lit up. He jumped up and sprinted over to me.

“Gen! You’re alive!”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“I thought you were dead! Someone told me that someone from North Korea was looking for you.”

“You knew I was on my honeymoon. Why are you so worried? I was a whole ocean away.”

“They still could have gotten to you.”

I laughed.

“I’m fine. You know, for a grown man, you still act like a two-year-old. Come on, you look cold, you can stay with us tonight. Then, I’m kicking you out.”

He fake gasped.

“You wouldn’t dare!”

We both laughed. I put my arm around his shoulders and brought him inside. As I went into the house, it felt like I had left my past behind. But who knows? Maybe the North Korean Army will find me yet!

**Jonah Jahnke**  
**Willmar**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

### **Secrets of the Elements**

Jordan trudged through the woods, staring at the moon gleaming off the wet leaves. He was walking home from his late football practice. Jordan had always wondered why practice was so late. It was very dark and Jordan was tired. He had bruises and bumps all over from getting tackled. He was the top wide receiver for his team and always had great catches. He loved football so much, even though his mom and dad were unsure if they actually wanted him to play. Jordan had stood his ground, and begged his parents to join, and they eventually gave in.

Jordan was twelve years old and had scraggly blond hair and blue eyes. Lots of the girls in school liked him for his athletic talent and good looks. He lived in a small town near San Francisco called Crane Valley. It always had the nicest warm weather, even during the night. But it was also pretty windy.

On this particular night, something was off about his usual path home from football. Something in the air felt off. Suddenly, his feet skidded to a stop. Jordan looked around, confused. It had been hot and windy during his practice, but now it was eerily calm – the trees silent, the wind soft, and the moon dimmer than usual. He was scared. All he could think about was getting home, seeing his parents, and then immediately going to bed.

Right as Jordan decided to forget about the peculiar silence, he walked straight into something very large he

couldn't see. He tumbled backwards into the path. He felt splitting pain as his head hit the gravel.

*What was that?* Jordan thought.

At first, it seemed as if the giant rock answered him. But it wasn't a rock. The creature slowly got up and then let out a loud roar. Its teeth were shining off the moon, its red eyes glowed like coals, and it had a huge wingspan that stretched across the trail, blocking Jordan's way. The monster also had something weird about its scales. They were swirls of purple, black and silver. The creature's creepy eyes were staring straight into him and its hot breath made Jordan's hair stand up. Jordan was trapped. What did this creature want from him? He wasn't going to find out. He had to find a way to escape.

Jordan whipped around and saw a huge orange-red eagle that looked as if it was burning almost floating above the trail. Jordan ducked as the eagle suddenly shot fire out of his mouth, hitting the monster. The monster roared for a second time. But this time, the roaring didn't stop. Almost as if breaking into song, he opened its mouth in unison and breathed out a tendril of blue-purple colored smoke. The smoke gently wound its way around the eagle's body, trapping it. The eagle thrashed around trying to free itself. But it was too late for the abnormally large bird. The smoke spread tighter around the eagle's body, and it let out an earsplitting screech. The bird collapsed on the ground in a heap, smoldering and finally vanishing into thin air.

The creature had killed it with no thought or concern. How did that happen? Jordan looked back at the creature with wide eyes, confused. The creature was waving his claws gracefully in the air. It let out another deep growl and the ground began to shake. The path Jordan was standing on turned into a swirly tunnel, enveloping him and sucking him into the ground.

Jordan screamed. He was falling through an endless pitch-black void. Jordan looked behind him and saw Earth slowly fading away. He was lucky he didn't have motion sickness like his mother. She was always taking a trip to the bathroom after a long car ride. Hadn't he just been walking home from football practice? *This can't be real*, he thought. He wanted to laugh about the whole thing, but everything about the day had made him not himself.

Jordan had woken up that morning to his brother folding his laundry for him, which was strange. His math teacher, Mr. Mirth had kept stopping mid-sentence to rub his temples. He swore his pizza at lunch had worms on it instead of cheese. Now, Jordan couldn't think straight. He was so scared he couldn't even speak.

Zooming along, he saw the distinct outline of an orange and blue planet. *Where am I, what planet is this?* Jordan managed to think with his terrified thoughts. All he could feel was confusion. He wondered what his parents would do when they realized he was gone. His mom would be frantic. But all he could do now was wait.

After about two hours, the tunnel started plummeting downward, slowly angling toward a massive ball that seemed to be a planet. The tunnel opened up, and Jordan finally slammed into soft sand surrounded by the most turquoise blue water. As Jordan gained consciousness, he saw a figure slowly walking toward him. As the man got closer, he reached his hand out.

Jordan grabbed the man's hand, got up and brushed off the sand. The figure had messy black hair with a purple stripe running through it. He was wearing a black mask that fit perfectly around his face with only his dark green eyes showing through. The figure gave him a brief blank stare, then turned away. Though Jordan was terrified of this man, he was even more scared of being alone on this new planet.

“Wait!” Jordan said. “Who are you?”

“Jose, my name is Jose,” he replied, and started walking in the other direction again!

Jordan took a step forward, attempting to follow him.

“Why are you following me?” the man growled in his deep gravelly voice.

“I-I...” Jordan stammered, trying to look anywhere but at the mysterious person. As he was staring at the ground, he couldn’t help but be interested in a brightly colored pebble gleaming in the bright sun.

Jose let out a sigh. “That is a gem of Aval. Those stones are very powerful and only given to those who have done a good deed. Well... I guess it is kind of cool to *finally* see a human around here.”

Jordan’s stomach lurched. The man could see his shock.

“Well, yes. And I’m not the *only* person here, I’m just the only human,” Jose corrected.

Jordan’s breath increased. How was he the only person, human, in this world, maybe even the galaxy?

“I’m guessing you are very confused and tired right now,” Jose said with a frown. “Here, I’ll bring you back to my place to tell you about where you are. You are not to fear me.”

*Should I trust him?* Jordan thought. His mom had told him not to trust anybody he didn’t know. If this man was telling the truth, though, maybe he would help him.

“I’ll go with you, but only if you promise it’s safe,” Jordan said, reluctant.

“So, that settles it. Come on, there are people here that will want to kill us, so we better get moving,” Jose said. “Oh, and I never got to ask you your name, what is it?”

“I’m Jordan,” said Jordan. “I have come from the planet Earth and I was sucked through what I think was a



portal caused by a huge monster with a tail and giant wings,” he finished, now out of breath.

“That ‘creature’ was my friend Stargaze, a galaxy dragon,” Jose stated. Then he added, very sadly, “I only gave her one portal pass.”

“What’s a portal pass?” Jordan said, curious.

“It’s something in my world that is used to teleport you to another galaxy out of range from this one. And I only gave Stargaze ONE of them,” Jose said.

But before Jordan could ask any more, the ground started to shake, causing both of them to topple over. “Um, what is that?” Jordan exclaimed.

A giant snake towered over them, his mouth gaping open, showing his razor sharp teeth. “Hello, Jordan, my name is Venom,” the snake hissed.

“H-hello,” Jordan stammered. “How did you know my name?”

“I know everything. I can read your mind. And, you have something I want,” Venom said. The words hit Jordan like a lightning bolt. He staggered back and tripped, falling into the pile of sand. The sand and dirt moved with the impact. Jordan felt it get into his eyes and throat, and he began to cough.

Jose quickly helped him up – and then Venom slammed into Jose.

“Jordan, run to the cave now!” Jose screamed, as Venom slapped him with his tail. Jose flew into the air and slammed into the cliff, a gash forming on his side. The sand was starting to turn a red color. “I said go!”

“How am I going to get in a cave I can’t even see?” Jordan yelled.

“It detects human DNA,” Jose said. “Just put your hand in the middle of the big rock and it will open.”

Jordan looked around. At the end of the beach lay a giant black volcanic-type rock. He sprinted over to it, the same way he ran when readying to make a great catch in football. Once he reached the rock, he gently placed his hand in the middle of it and a door opened. Jose was right – it worked! Jordan ran through the door of the rock, which opened up into a lit cave. The door immediately closed behind him. Inside of the cave – though Jordan could barely tell it was a cave, come to think of it – was a sparkling white diamond chandelier with a blue halo surrounding it, almost as if it contained magic. A large basin of clear water underneath it appeared to have no bottom. Jordan also noticed that a large table, with two seats on both sides and a candle in the middle. Beyond the table, five tunnels branched off in different directions. Which tunnel should he take? Or should he stay near the chandelier? Jose didn't tell him where to go once he got into the cave. He decided to wait sitting on one of the chairs, near the chandelier. It felt like it had a protective power to it. It reminded him of the gear he wore in football that protected him too.

About five minutes later, Jose came sprinting into the room, a gaping gash bleeding across his face.

“What happened to you, Jose?” Jordan asked.

“Venom slashed me across the face and poisoned me with his tainted fangs,” Jose said, teeth clenched in pain. “I think we should sit down for a glass of water.”

“Water! Right now, when I don't even know what's happening! Where is Venom?”

“If you want some answers, Jordan, then I need you to sit down for some water,” glared Jose.

“I do want to know what's happening, and I am a little thirsty. But, aren't we trying to escape a venomous snake?” Jordan said, panicked.

Jose put his arm around Jordan's shoulder. "I am here to protect you." This put Jordan at ease and he decided to sit down near the chandelier. Jose began to tell Jordan everything.

"We are in the Elamanatarine galaxy and now at the abandoned planet of Plant. Jordan, you were sent here by Stargaze to help us defeat Venom in the war ravaging our planet. Stargaze and I are part of the resistance. The only way to defeat Venom's army is with the power of human DNA. I only had one portal pass, and I gave it to Stargaze to find the one human we thought worthy of the task. Unfortunately, Venom heard what we were doing and sent his eagle ally through the same portal to stop Stargaze from sending you back here. It must not have stopped him, though."

"The eagle was there." Jordan said. "Stargaze wrapped the eagle in a blue- purple smoke and the eagle died. Vanished, really."

Jose had a tear in his eye. "Stargaze used the Levitius power on the eagle. When you use that power, you do not survive. Stargaze gave her life for this mission. I will never see my friend again. Her death will not be in vain! Venom wants to rule our planet and kill anyone in his path. He has created an army of snakes that kill their enemy by sinking their poisonous teeth into their skin. Some can even shoot the poison out their teeth. The only way to overcome the poison is to create a potion of human blood under the magical chandelier." Jose looked up, the color leaving his face. "If you are willing, Jordan, we can create this potion by placing your blood in the basin. Then, we will have created the potion to defeat his army. It will also save me now. I have only minutes left before the poison takes me."

"Will it hurt?" Jordan asked, scared.

“No.” Jose said solemnly. “But, once you place your blood in the basin, I’m not sure what happens to you. I’m not sure if you will survive, or be in pain, or have to stay here forever. But I also have no portal passes left to send you home, either. I know I am asking a lot, but I will do everything I can to get you home and protect you.”

Jordan thought about his family and his friends. The idea of never seeing them again broke his heart. But, he had been chosen to save this planet from destruction. He had to help them. He knew he had the strength. “I will help you.” Jordan said.

Jordan could see the relief on Jose’s face. “Thank you, kind child. I am forever indebted to you.”

Jordan walked over to the basin, the water a depth beyond comprehension. The surface sparkled from the chandelier above and made way to a dark abyss below. Jose walked over, pulled a knife from his pocket, and asked, “Are you ready?”

“Yes.” Jordan said. And he was. Jose took the sleeve off the knife and gently cut Jordan’s hand. It hurt, but Jordan was brave. The blood began to pool under the blade and Jordan placed his hand over the basin of water. He watched, almost in slow motion, as the blood ran into the magical basin. It fell so slow and stopped before it hit the water.

Venom was there. He was wielding some sort of power, preventing the blood from entering the basin.

A large gust of wind knocked Jordan over, and Jose was running toward Venom with all the energy he had left, yelling something that Jordan could not understand.

What was happening? He heard Venom hissing and attempting to thrash at Jose. The room was spinning. The five tunnels surrounding the chandelier were forming into one. Jordan heard Jose yelling, “Stand up, Jordan! Stand up!

If you don't, the potion to save the planet will be gone forever!"

This brought Jordan back. He opened his eyes. He felt around the ground and grabbed a rock to help him stand. The wind was so strong, wanting to knock him down. Jordan summoned as much power as he could, thinking about the times he had to overcome a tackle in football. He pushed himself off the ground, the wind still blowing, and finally he stood on his two feet, placed his hands over the basin and the blood dropped into the water. Everything went black.

When Jordan opened his eyes, he was no longer in the cave. His football coach and teammates were standing over him, concerned. His mom was crying tears of joy and he was so happy to see her.

"What happened to me?" Jordan asked.

"You caught the winning touchdown, and as the other team tackled you, you blacked out," his coach said. "The odd thing is, we heard a hissing noise as you went down. Plus, this colorful pebble is stuck to your helmet. Must be your good luck charm."

It all came back to Jordan then. The planet of Plant. Jose. The gleaming pebble. The dragon and eagle. His mom and brother told him it was all just a dream, but he was not so sure. In fact, he knew it was real.

The stone stayed on his helmet. He knew he didn't need it, but it gave him luck from time to time. Jose had saved him.

Jordan thinks about the planet of Plant occasionally, wondering what happened to them. He imagines Jose defeating Venom. Maybe someday he will find out.

**Teo Winger**  
**Mountain Lake**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

**The Elves and the Shoemaker**

Once upon a time in Argentina, there was a successful shoemaker who lived in the grand city of Cordoba. Everyday people came into his shoe shop and bought shoes. He was the best shoemaker in all of Cordoba. One day a man, Sr. Emiliano Fernandez, the owner of Mercado Libre, came to his shop.

“Hola,” announced Sr. Fernandez, “I have heard all about your store and how good your shoes are.”

“Gracias,” said the shoemaker. “Would you like to buy some shoes?”

“Si, I would like to place an order, a big order, and I want it done by Christmas.”

“Sure, how many shoes do you want, and why do you want them?” the shoemaker asked.

“I want 2000 shoes!”

“2000!?! That’s loco!”

“I know, it’s a lot, but I need enough shoes to sell in my store.”

“Okay, fine, but under one condition – you need to tell everyone at your store how great my store is,” said the shoemaker.

“But if you don’t get the shoes sent to me in time, I will make your store go out of business,” Fernandez replied.

“Deal.”

Sr. Emiliano Fernandez left, and that is when the shoemaker realized... Christmas was in five days! He had to

make 400 shoes a day, and he didn't have any people to help!

The first thing the shoemaker did was make a sign outside the door saying, "Help needed." Then he started making shoes...

...And suddenly, hundreds of elves walked into the store.

"Hola," exclaimed the shoemaker, "how may I help you?"

"We are here to help you," the elves replied.

"Help?" the shoemaker asked, puzzled. "With what?"

"With the shoes you need to make. We read the sign outside the door."

"Oh, the sign, right," the shoemaker said, remembering. "Do you know how to make shoes, or do I need to teach you?"

"No, we already know how to make shoes," the elves confidently remarked. "We were considered Mercado Libre's secret to success. Well, until we got fired for not making enough shoes for Sr. Fernandez."

"How many shoes did you have to make?"

"5,000 shoes in five days."

"How close were you to finishing?"

"We were one pair off."

"Wait, could you make 2,000 in five days?"

"Absolutely."

"Bueno, you guys are hired. Let's get to work."

That is when the elves and the shoemaker started working together. The very first day, the elves proved to be very good. Not only were the elves able to make more than 400 shoes, but they made them with incredible quality. When the elves decided to finally stop for the night, they had

almost 700 done! Since the elves did such a nice job, the shoemaker decided to give them a place to sleep for the night.

Now in the land of Cordoba there was a group of Dark Dwarves, one of the most wretched kidnapping groups in all Cordoba. Sr. Fernandez realized he needed them. The shop of the shoemaker was his only competition, and now his old clients were working for the shoemaker. He knew he had only one option, and that was the Dark Dwarves. The Dwarves did their usual, slipping a magic sleeping potion into the elves' food.

In the morning, the shoemaker went to wake up the elves, but when the shoemaker strolled into the room, the room was completely ruined – and zero elves left! “Darn. Those elves either got kidnapped, or they betrayed me. No, they wouldn’t betray me. Just look at the quality of the shoes that they made,” he thought to himself. “I must find them.”

For the next few hours, the shoemaker tried to figure out who kidnapped the elves asking people what they saw last night. On his way back to his house, he noticed a mysterious barn hidden in some trees, so he decided to investigate. In the barn he found some strange equipment like bows, arrows, and knives. In a different room he started to hear voices as if a group of people were talking, so he quietly crept into the next room. There, he found the Dark Dwarves with all of the elves! “I am so lucky,” he thought. “All I have to do is find a way to distract them so I can safely untie the elves!”

The shoemaker threw an immense rock next to one of the doors, then circled around to the other door.

“What was that noise?” one of the Dark Dwarves asked. “Let’s go see.”

All of the dwarves went to see what the noise was. Meanwhile, the shoemaker successfully untied all the elves,



and he and the elves got out of the barn and back to the shop without ever being noticed.

At the shop, the elves got back to work. Working harder than ever, the elves finally managed to get all of the shoes finished just like Sr. Fernandez wanted. Sr. Fernandez admitted defeat and reluctantly told the whole countryside how great the shoemaker's store was. The elves stayed with the shoemaker and worked for him. They became great friends, and lived happily ever after.



**NONFICTION**  
**Grades 5 & 6**



**Penni Moore**  
**Hills**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

**Fear**

I'm afraid of the ocean.

It sounds as simple as that, but we all know it's not. Our fears are layers of small unreasonable reasons to be scared. It's sad but true, and that's exactly why I took this summer to throw all my fears away. I did this simply by taking my fear, the ocean, and doing as much as I can to be in it. So, my journey of murdering my fears started by going to the Channel Islands.

After three days in California, the one day I'd been dreading had come: we would kayak around Anacapa Island. Every little thing about it scared me: the possibility of seasickness, the kayaking, kayaking with FISH, kayaking with seals, kayaking in CAVES, tipping the kayak, BARNACLES on cave walls, scuba diving afterwards, with even more FISH! I didn't know how I'd live through it.

After I threw on some random clothes, we – my mom (the whole reason we were going), my dad, and my sister – got into our rental car and drove a short car ride to the docks. Stepping out of the car, we quickly walked over to our boat for the day. It was called the Sunfish. We were greeted with a “great” pep talk about seasickness (which only caused my worries to grow), then set off onto the boat. Reluctantly, I sat down on a seat higher up and assessed all I needed to know. I had researched before our trip and learned everything that might help me survive this adventure. The boat was a decent size and easily could fit a dozen people. Small vinyl seats

ringed the outside of the boat, and there were also a few down the middle (where I'd chosen to sit). To the right of me, a flight of stairs ran down into what I assumed was a restroom. Above my head sat rows of kayaks, tied up with rope. Nothing I saw reassured my nerves much, though.

After just a few minutes of waiting, a very excited man (the captain) announced we'd be leaving the docks. Everyone started chattering, happily waiting for their adventure to start. The boat slowly started to move out of the dock. We passed hundreds of other boats tied to the dock. We started seeing fat seals sitting on the rocks, and wooden paths. It went like this for a long time, making the excited passengers impatient. Slowly we started seeing fewer and fewer boats until we were completely surrounded by water and fog. The ocean was filled with small waves, beautiful blues, and seals. Turns out that there were seats at the tip of the boat, so of course we had to check it out. To move around the boat, you had to grip a bar on the side, and pull yourself forward, a strange sensation. After pulling ourselves all the way up, we were met with an even more gorgeous scene. The water was magical, with its waves practically weaving a tapestry. At the front of the boat, we, surprisingly, were all alone. So, we sat there, for probably about an hour or so. It felt like the whole ocean was ours.

It was no lie that we were all hoping for some great majestic whale to jump out of the water, and that we were all greatly disappointed when it didn't come. After waiting so long for any sign of wildlife, we suddenly saw cliffs on the horizon. Not an animal, but good enough. These cliffs/mountains stretched high, in many different formations. Our captain told us we'd be arriving at our destination soon. Despite the great sadness of no sea life encounters, this seemed to be enough to pep everyone else

up. For me, though, this was my true test of bravery; we were preparing the kayak portion of this journey.

We were all divided into groups. Ours consisted of my family of four, a couple, and our guide. We hopped into our kayaks in pairs (I was with my dad). The kayaks felt sturdy, but I still didn't trust them. Because of all my worries, I failed to notice the beauty I was paddling in. However, I snapped out of it eventually. As I looked around, I was instantly amazed by the water. It was an amazing blue, and pretty clear. There were also patches of kelp the color of yellow autumn leaves. Though I can't necessarily say I loved the kelp forests below us, it was interesting to see the buoyant bulbs growing among sticky leaves. Looking up, you could see the cliffs. By now, it had gotten quite warm, and I was already sore from paddling. With the sun burning my back, and sunscreen dripping from my face, I was kind of miserable. Thankfully the pain helped me stop worrying... until I thought about the creatures that might be swimming under me. Then I was back to anxiety land.

After 20 minutes of hard labor, we arrived at our first cave. It had a small opening, and we were told to push our paddles off the side of the wall to move forward. (Oh, and to look for crabs. Just another worry to add to my list.) Our guide went in first, but in front of the cave opening was a bloated body. I may have freaked out. It was rotted through, pretty much unrecognizable. The guide simply pushed it out of the way but not before he gave us some amazingly horrid facts. Turns out that body was either a seal or a dolphin, killed because of a poisonous thing going on in the ocean called the Red Tide. Sea mammals eat this poisonous algae and it kills them. It was a truly awful thing to hear. Still, all we could do was push past the body (and try not to breathe – it smelled bad) and head into the cave.

Turns out there were a lot of crabs. Blue ones, red ones, any color really. And they were everywhere – like everywhere. Once we were all in a circular room in the cave, we were told to look for lobsters at the bottom of the cave. The guide shone a flashlight at the ground, creating brilliant rays of blue in the water. In those rays you could see the scurries of dark shapes flash through your vision.

Soon, we were directed out for more painful paddling. Our next destination was a rough wall, where supposedly we would see barnacles. This time, we had to go one at a time, so while the first group went, we had to hold onto the kelp as an anchor! KELP! All so we wouldn't float away! I didn't hold on at first, but after a hot minute, I grabbed a small chunk of slimy kelp and waited until our turn came. The first group had been told to point the barnacles out to us, but they didn't (figures). So, we ended up seeing no barnacles, which surprisingly made me mad. My dad and I were both quite grumpy about not getting to see them, and alas, we continued.

The pain in my arms was unstoppable, so once we got to our next cave and were told we'd have to paddle very quickly, I was crushed. To add to this awfulness, we had to see another corpse, this one very obviously a dolphin. To think that a creature so energetic and beautiful could be killed by just a stupid piece of algae was insane. Apparently the reason we had to paddle hard was because in this cave, to exit, you had to quickly paddle out before the water rose back up. You probably had a 10-second opening, which was not very much time. So, nervous as heck, I paddled my arms off. Fortunately, we made it, but not without pretty much getting soaked, which, even though it hadn't been on my list of to-dos, felt great. Because of the splash of water, my whole body felt rejuvenated. I probably could've kept



paddling for days after that. So, of course, that's when we decided to take a break.

While we reapplied our sunscreen and enjoyed the ocean around us, our guide instructed us to take a look below. Now excited to find something to do, I strained my head over the side of the kayak. The shimmering water was perfectly clear, its beauty only muddled by the occasional bit of kelp. Not quite sure what to look for, I just kept my eyes peeled. After looking, while slowly becoming burned by the beating sun, I was about to give up... until I saw a shadow pass beside a clump of seaweed. Since everyone else had been unsuccessful, I yelled up to our guide. He responded, saying I had spotted a leopard shark. Overjoyed by my discovery, I was in a great mood for our next leg of the adventure.

The second we turned the corner, he gestured for us to stop. Our group, confused by the sudden abruption, paused to listen. Our guide had hopped out of his kayak and was now holding a small seal in his hands. Everyone went silent. I was shocked. It appeared to be wrapped in the kelp, and its body was limp. Our guide explained how it must've gotten stuck, and well, died. I zoned out while he spoke. I just couldn't believe how much wildlife struggled, even in such a beautiful, thriving place like the protected Channel Islands. It was truly heartbreaking.

Another cave, more instructions, bam! We paddled slowly through this one. At first, we saw nothing special, until we turned to the left. There was a patch of light from an opening in the ceiling, hitting the water and turning it into a magnificent color. We stared at it in a moment of awe. It made me push away all the stupid fears I'd been having. After all, aren't these the moments that you put on a brave face to experience? I basked in the beauty and gorgeousness.

It amazed me how something so simple can be so...  
breathtaking.

After making our way out of the cave, we were met by two seals (don't worry, this time they were alive). We stared at them as they swam around us. The cave had opened out into a giant abyss of water. Birds were everywhere, the sun beating down once again, the roar of a boat (maybe ours, actually) in the distance. Now we just had to wait. It wasn't too hard, though. All you had to do was look up, down, to your left, anywhere and you'd be instantly captivated. The roar of the boat was getting louder. Over the corner of the cliff I started to see it. Our time was over, and I had to admit I was really disappointed.

We paddled back, loaded up our kayaks, and sat down on the Sunfish to take a break. First thing I heard after sitting: "Time to scuba dive!"

No. Why?!? I had not been informed of this. *Heck no, I'm not going in WITH THE FISH, the seals, the crabs, the kelp, the BODIES and the – the – nope, never.*

My mom said I didn't have to, that I could wait on the boat if I was scared. It's time... I'm doing it. I don't know why, so don't ask. Well, I'm actually thinking it might be like the kayaking, something I'm scared of but will be ok with and will pay off in the end. In reality though, I'm shaking. I don't want to get in that water, but I've already said yes, so no time like that exact moment.

I gradually scoot towards the water, and just as my toe hits the water, my body goes rigid. The water is ice cold. Ice cold. Now I really don't want to do this, but the guide's literally leaving me back on the boat, so I jump in.

It hits me like a wall. I can feel my body going numb, feel every part of me slowly succumbing to the cold. However, I keep going. I go until I catch up with the rest of

the crew. Then I dip my head under, scared of what's going on under me in the perfectly clear water.

I can see shadows. One passes maybe five feet under me. I struggle to keep myself from losing it. This does not feel anything like the kayaking. No sense of beauty, no nothing, just cold, scary water and creatures.

It seems to go on forever. Finally we head back to the boat, but guess what's in our way: a portion of another kelp forest. Anything could be hiding under those things, fish, sharks, seals – anything. But there seems to be no other way. (Yay for me!) So we crawl over all of it (literally, we crawl on top of it), the strange feeling covering half my body. I give myself a mental high-five once I'm back on the boat. The day is almost, just almost done, and then I can take a nap. (I don't get to.)

My family takes our place on the front of the boat, once again hoping for a sign of wildlife, and we get it.

Hundreds of dolphins have swarmed our boat. For a minute or two it is just us and the dolphins. It's beautiful. The sun is setting, casting an orange-ish pink haze around us, and below the dolphins are everywhere. There's a wonderful feel to all of it. The dolphins are mesmerizing, and soon nearly everyone is up in front with us. It's truly a magical moment.

We couldn't have been more than 5-10 minutes from the port when a man came up from behind us.

"Your daughter has beautiful hair," he directed at me.

"Oh, um... thanks," I responded awkwardly.

"It looks a lot like toe wheat," he continued.

I was really weirded out now. What the heck was he talking about?

"It's the perfect color, matches up just right,"

"O-okay," I say.

He leaves after a quick goodbye. I burst out laughing. I don't really understand what he was talking about, but whatever it was, it was ridiculous.

We've docked at our port. I take one long look at the sea and the sunset before heading back to our car.

I'm happy I got to enjoy this day, that I didn't let my fears stop me from having fun. I pushed them away (for the most part), and look where it got me.

**Cassie Scandrett**  
**Slayton**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

### **My First Basketball Game**

“I’m nervous,” I say as butterflies fly around in my stomach. This is my first basketball game ever. Most of my friends on the team played last year, except me. I was in dance, but wanted to switch to basketball this year. I’m Cassie and this is my story of my first time playing on the fifth grade Youth Girls’ Basketball League.

Today our game is in Lamberton, and we’re playing TMB and HLOF. All my family is coming to support me, so we take the black minivan. Once we arrive, I get out of the van and start heading in. All the kids walking in have lots of red and black (because those are the school colors). All of a sudden I spot one of my teammates walking in too. I quickly tell my Mom and run over to her. She’s with her dad.

“Hi,” I say nervously and excitedly at the same time.

“Hi,” she answers.

Once we get in, we see our coach. He’s with the sixth-grade team because their game is still going on. As I am observing the sixth graders, I hear my name.

“Cassie, come over here!” one of my teammates that I didn’t realize had arrived yet calls.

“Coming!” I respond.

Eventually everyone gets here and we head down to the court. We are playing TMB first, which my teammate, Kenslee, told me they had played last time and beat. Technically this is our second time playing them this year, except I had a piano recital last time so I missed it.

“Okay, time to warm up,” our coach says, pulling me out of my thoughts. Once we are done warming up, we

huddle in to make a plan and decide who's in first. I am happy when coach decides I don't have to start the game. I'll be going in second, though. The buzzer blares, shrieking like a bunch of angry ducks, letting us know the game is beginning. I choose a spot near Kenslee. The seats are red and black, of course, with the school's mascot on them.

Once we are a few minutes into the game, coach intensely tells us what we could do better and what we're doing correctly. The moment for me to go in comes too fast! My coach yells, "Subs!" and in I go. The other team goes in for a shot and Lola, my teammate, gets the rebound and passes it to the point guard, who dribbles it down the court. My defender is short with extremely blond and curly hair. All of a sudden she yells, "I got number 8!" but then she looks the other way. I sprint backdoor to get open, just like coach taught us. Backdoor is running behind your defender and getting down by the basket ready for a shot. My teammate passes to me, and I immediately look at the basket, quickly checking if it's open to shoot. It's not. Then my defender gets in front of me again. I fake a shot, then bounce pass the ball under her raised arms. Lola gets it and takes a shot. Swish. A perfect shot!

I take a breath of relief. This wasn't so hard. But now I have to play defense, and I will not let my opponent get the ball. "I got number 3," I call. Once the ball gets down the court, number 3 tries to get open. Her teammate gets a pass but I intercept it. Yes! Finally something exciting! I dribble down to the hoop, feeling a rush of energy. I make a great pass to my teammate and she takes a shot. I hold my breath. The ball rolls around the rim, and... it falls off. No biggie, though. Everyone misses shots in basketball. I high-five her as she shakes off her mistake.

The other team makes their first shot. We're still winning, though. Out of nowhere the buzzer blares, making

me jump. It's half time and my team is up by a little bit. We huddle in again and talk about some of the mistakes we made and how to improve them. One of the big mistakes was us all bunching up by the ball. The coach tells us that in order to get a chance to shoot we need to spread out so the player with the ball has room to dribble and make a pass. When we are finished chatting, some of the players head out on the court to continue the game. Thankfully, again, I don't have to start, although I did have some pretty good plays in the first half.

As I watch the game, I study my teammates' choices and the rhythms to their movement. This game is starting to go wrong. The other team continues to score over and over again. Finally, the time comes for me to go in again. This time, I realize I am actually anticipating getting to go in. As I head in, I hear the sound of basketball shoes squeaking against the gym floor sounding exactly like rubbing your finger down a freshly waxed window. I don't know what happens, but here coming at me is a player chasing the ball that she must have dropped. I grab it and dribble down the court, smoothly but quickly. When I try to make a pass, a player on TMB snatches the ball out of the air, but our trusty point guard is able to get it back. We score again and so does the other team. Back and forth, again and again. The ball comes and goes.

With one minute left, subs are put in and the rest of us taken out. I get to watch the end of the game, even though I would much rather be in it to end. The other team is too far ahead to beat, even if we scored a couple more shots. My team still plays their hardest as the game is ending. 5, 4, 3, 2... shoot, 1. Score. The obnoxious buzzer blares again.

Even though we lost, our game was still a triumph for me. I learned a lot, had fun and even made some impressive plays. This was still a special first basketball game that I

know I will remember. I don't know how our next game will turn out, but I know it's a great way to grow in my skills, try something new and have tons of fun!



**Grace Prohl**  
**Beaver Creek**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

**The Last Pitch**

Two outs, bases loaded. I'm up to bat. It's all up to this. I need to hit the ball, send my best friend home, and we will go into another inning. I step into the box and the pitcher starts winding up.

1, 2, 3 – STRIKE 1!

My heart feels like it is going to jump out of my chest. All I must do is hit that ball.

1, 2, 3... CLANG!

The ball is flying straight toward the pitcher. I sprint to first base. I look around to see if I can go to second, and my best friend is flying home.

Then, I turn to see where the ball is and CLANG. My best friend is headfirst on base. The catcher is spread out on the base and has the ball in her hand, and the umpire calls, "OUT!"

I just about fell over in disbelief. I only saw half of it. But I know she's not out. Plus, I don't really trust this seventeen-year-old umpire. Everybody feels frozen in place at that moment. I start racking my brain trying to figure out if there is anything wrong in this situation.

At that moment, it seemed like it dawned on everybody.

The bases were loaded. That meant once the catcher got the ball, she just had to touch the base, and my best friend would be out. But she was sprawled out all over the base, leaving little to no room for my best friend. That should mean that it wasn't an out, right?

Our coach steps out onto the field to talk to the umpire.

I go to see if my best friend is okay, because it looks like she took a pretty hard hit. I ask her if she is okay, and she tries to talk but starts crying instead. I feel so bad. When we look over, it seems like our coach is done talking to the umpire. I hold my breath...

“OUT!”

“What, how?”

I feel my jaw drop.

“That, that, catcher how...”

The other team does a little victory dance right in front of us. The five of us out on the field start walking into the dugout, a little sad but more disappointed and mad.

The one thing that made me most frustrated in that moment was my friend sliding into the catcher. Like, shouldn’t the catcher at least say sorry? I am a catcher too. If someone slid into me and started crying, I would at least go see if they were okay. We all left a little sad that we lost, and that we wouldn’t see each other for a few months until school started up again.

*Thank you to my best friend Zoey Huisman who let me write this story about us.*

**POETRY**  
**Grades 7 & 8**



**Lilly Proffen  
Forest Lake**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

**Lilly's Life**

**I have experienced flying over the mountains in Colorado.**

I hear the wind racing past the airplane's body as we zoom through the sky. I smell the crisp air that only exists higher up in the atmosphere. I see the beautifully breathtaking mountain chain from a bird's eye view, the snow dusting the peaks like powdered sugar. I also see the crop field patterns on the ground, making a checkerboard of corn. I taste the metallic microphone attached to my headset. I touch the smooth, cool glass of the window as we shoot through the air. I love flying.

**I imagine a beach without pollution.** I hear the seagulls squawking happily as they flap their wings through the fresh air. I smell the distinct sulfur scent of salt water as I paddle through the ocean, my hands gliding fast like fish darting away from a predator. I taste the grit of sand that flew into my mouth and the crisp air that surrounds the sea. I see the bright blue sky and the blazing sun grinning down at me. I touch the cool, damp sand beneath my feet as I frolic along the shoreline of this immaculate beach and I feel the crabs scurrying across my toes, tickling me like the air on a windy day. The beach has no plastic, no bottles, no netting, no rope, no wood, and no paper. It's free of pollution, it's natural. At this moment, I am a child when they get a new toy, bursting with happiness. I didn't know something could be so beautiful.

**I know that my Grandma has the best garden.** I hear the young birds chirping as the sun rises, waiting for their mothers

to come back with breakfast. I smell the soil on my hands and the sweet raspberries, plump for picking. I see the dirtbeds, filled with vibrant vegetables that are thriving in the spring weather, looking glad to be in the warmth and out of the dead of winter. I taste the sugar snap peas and round red tomatoes bursting in my mouth with a “POP”. I touch the vegetables as I pluck and drop them into the bottom of my woven basket. We harvest the fruits and veggies though the morning as the sun rises higher in the sky. I glance around at the lively plants, feeling at peace. My Grandma has the best garden.

**I wonder, what if we could be animals?** I see the vast, cloudless sky as I bring my strong wings up and down, sailing through the air. I smell the sweet fragrance of hibiscus flower as I flutter rapidly trying to get a taste. I hear the bugs buzzing noisily around me as I leap from one lilypad to another and try to avoid the shimmering water below. I taste the fresh dewy grass of a pasture, the water droplets clinging onto the stems like little children not wanting to part from their mother. The long grass skims my darting legs as I bound through the savannah, faster than light. The soaring eagle, the buzzing hummingbird, the jumping frog, the munching cow, and the leaping gazelle. Sometimes I long to be an animal, frolicking and free.

**I believe that the rain is peaceful.** Some may call it dark and dreary, but I find it calming like a mother’s lullaby. The wind whooshes wildly, but I still hear the pitter-patter of the rain on my metal roof, coming down quickly as if the clouds are crying. I smell the damp, earthiness of a rainy day and the hypnotizing smell of chocolate-chip cookies. I see the fog crowding my woods, looking like a mystical forest, and I watch the raindrops racing down my windowpane as if they are being timed. I taste the soothing hot chocolate that I hold

in my mug as it warms my stomach up. I touch the cool window and draw patterns on the glass as my warm breath fogs it. How could rain not be peaceful?

**Abbey Lepp  
Butterfield**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

### **All About Me**

I have experienced...  
 dusty air dancing down the gravel roads  
 rock picking in dirt and heat,  
 sweat dripping down my face  
 no neighbors watching my every move  
 fresh, clean air blowing across my checks, lungs rejoicing

I imagine...  
 a ranch full of farm animals with raucous noise filling the air  
 a horse grazing in the pasture, waiting eagerly for a rider  
 shiny boots stomping across the yard,  
 gravel spitting sideways  
 mom wearing bell bottom jeans, calling me for supper

I know...  
 the sun rises in the east  
 each God-praising, hand-raising morning  
 the sound of my dad's truck tires racing up the driveway  
 the cry of a cornered animal when my dogs are on the loose  
 the footfalls of Ava running to win the race

I wonder...  
 where I will live in the wild countryside  
 what my purpose will be on this Earth  
 when I will own my own beautiful horse  
 why peace calms the spirit in the country

I believe...  
 I will have animals that will bring me happiness  
 that the seasons changing are magical



that muddy shoes in the house will make my mom scream  
living in the country is the best thing ever!

**Lexie Overvaag**  
**Luverne**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

**I Am the Sunset**

“I am the sunset,” he tells me, tilting his head forward.  
 He is only a painting,  
 with small sketches of ambers and golds,  
 sideways swipes of sky blue  
 and gentle maroons and a dab of white.  
 But he, oh, he is the sunset,  
 with the deep grooves of crimson lining his trunk  
 the soft yellow glimmering on his sunlit skin  
 reflecting off the sharp ivory of his tusks,  
 making more noticeable the small cream nicks scarring them.  
 And he is so gentle for such a giant beast,  
 from the smooth curves of his cheeks,  
 the gentle flapping of his ears,  
 the elegant arch of his forehead  
 to the tenderness of his deep watery eyes,  
 So tender, so sweet.  
 He is a masterpiece, I can tell;  
 I can tell simply by looking at him,  
 simply by *seeing* him,  
 feeling as though I could slip into the frame  
 and touch him.  
 He isn’t real.  
 But he might be.  
  
 He is the sunset.

**FICTION**  
**Grades 7 & 8**



**Lexie Overvaag  
Luverne**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

**Red Boots**

The girl, as small as could be, strode out of the pet shop clutching the fish bowl to her chest. She suddenly crouched down and peered into the bowl, as if to make sure her little fish was in there. Assured that he was, she grinned a toothy smile, displaying her missing tooth. “Come along,” her mother smiled, limping along on her cane. She had just had the cast removed from her leg, and was still in pain. Her father watched his sweet child tenderly and swiftly buckled her into her car seat. He then placed a gentle kiss on her golden curls.

As the minivan cruised lazily down the roads of the small town, the girl gazed into the bowl and watched her guppy flutter around in the water. “Hi. My name is Carla. I’m gonna call you...” Carla scrunched up her face as she thought. Then her bright green eyes lit up. “Starlight! How do you like that, Starlight?”

She grinned at her fish. He opened and closed his mouth.

“I knew it!” she exclaimed, giving the glass bowl a big smooch. Carla lowered her voice. “You’re the best fish ever,” she breathed, studying Starlight fondly as he swam against the curved side of the bowl, his blue fins lightly brushing against the glass.

“Carla, we’re home,” her daddy informed her as he turned off the engine and climbed out. Daddy walked over and slid open the door, unsnapped the belt buckle and lifted her out. “Come on, sweet angel!” When he placed her on the

ground, he lifted Starlight and was about to hand him to her. “Now, remember, be *very* careful when holding him, okay?”

Carla nodded confidently, placing a petite chubby hand on his coarse bearded cheek. “Don’t worry, Daddy. I know...” She used air quotes. “...’exactly’ what I’m doing.”

Daddy laughed. “Where have you seen anyone do that before?”

“At night, when you and Mommy are talking, and I come out to get a cookie, and you and Mommy stop talking, and I leave without the cookie,” Carla answered in one breath.

A funny look came over his face. He set Starlight down. “Oh.” Then he half-smiled. “Wait, hang on, you get cookies in the middle of the night?” Daddy tickled her tummy. “You silly girl!”

In between giggles, she panted out, “Please – just don’t – tell – *Mommy!*”

Daddy ruffled up her hair and patted her cheek. “Okay. I won’t.” He gently placed Starlight in her outstretched arms. “C’mon, let’s give Guppy a new home.”

“He’s *Starlight* now!” Carla protested as they headed inside the ruddy brick house. She smiled down at her red boots as they walked. She had just gotten them last week for her fifth birthday, and they were already her favorite.

The thunder boomed as Carla huddled under her blankets. *Be brave, be brave, be –  
kaBOOM*

She let out a squeak and dove deeper under the covers. “Be brave!” she squealed. Then she swam to the surface of the comforters. “Wait!” Carla scrambled out of bed and hurried over to the fish tank. “Are you scared?” she crooned, her voice getting quieter. She carefully lifted the lid

of the tank and dipped her hand in, wetting it. Then, ever so gently, she stroked Starlight's scales. "It's okay, little guy." The thunder and rain stopped.

She slid the lavender curtains down the rod and lifted the window open. "Look out, Starlight, and you'll see the city, and the park. Very pretty. But look up, *mi amor*. Look up and you'll see the stars. Stars are good. Very good." She kissed her fingers, then reached into the water and pressed them tenderly against his side. "You're safe."

Sirens. Sirens blasted through the still night air, shrieking through Carla's ears. Daddy's arm curled around her shoulder as the police car drove away down the street. They stood together under the stoop on the stairs outside. Sharp, stinging tears streamed down her cheeks. She gazed over her shoulder through the open door at the empty living room. Mommy was gone, for no reason she could figure out. They took her medicine, too. "Daddy?"

"Yes, Angel?" Her father's voice shook.

"Why did they take Mommy?" She watched his throat bob as he swallowed hard. Carla reached up a chubby hand to stroke his spiky stubble.

"They took her somewhere where she can get better."

"Like a hospital?"

A pause. "Yeah, kind of."

"Oh." Carla stared at the wet cement and shuffled her feet. She liked how shiny her red boots got in the rain. Then she looked back up at Daddy. "Was she sick?" Another swallow. She tried it herself, to see how it felt. *Ouch*. It hurt a little bit. Daddy must have a tough throat.

"Yes," he said finally, running his hands through his spiky brown hair. "Yes, she was sick, because her medicine

made her sick.” Daddy rubbed his hand over the back of her crinkly rain coat, which was also red.

She pressed her face against his warm side and closed her eyes. Letting out a deep breath, she leaned in close against her daddy. He was *so* big and tall, he made her feel safe. Then another question popped into her head. “When will she come home?”

His muscles tensed under her head and she lifted her chin to look at him. Her eyes slowly widened as she saw that he was crying. Thick, silent, drops rolled down his face into his bushy brown beard. “I don’t know, Angel. I don’t know.”

Carla raised her head and stared at the sky. She could still hear sirens in the distance. And there were no stars in view. The clouds had covered them up.

The hilly landscape rolled past as Daddy drove through the countryside. Carla pressed her head against the window and closed her eyes. She didn’t know how long she had slept, but it was a good, restful, deep sleep, the kind where you feel pleasantly heavy when you wake up. Suddenly, she was rocked forward, and Daddy let out a yell. The seat belt tore across her neck.

There was a lot of honking and screaming and yelling. And then it was quiet. Carla lifted her head and unbuckled. “Daddy!”

She leaned forward and gasped. He was slumped forward, his hair falling into his handsome face, and there was oh so much red. Red dripping down his face, red splashed across the dash, and red soaking into the leather seats. Hot tears rushed down her face as she closed her eyes, willing it all to be a devastating dream. She prayed harder than she ever had for it to just be a dream.

But it wasn’t.



Carla was getting dizzy now. She rubbed her eyes and felt it sting. “Ouchy.” She looked at her hand and was vaguely aware of a lot of scarlet. She swept her hand across her face and stared at all the blood. Tears mingled with it as she closed her eyes and rested her head on the crystalline remains of the window, feeling them crunch beneath the weight of her heavy head. So, so, heavy.

Beeping and searing lights bored into Carla’s skull, making her bones buzz, and there was numbness and achiness all at the same time. She opened her bloodshot eyes, letting out a quiet groan. Rolling them to the side, she spotted familiar colors in the tank on her right. “Starlight!” she exclaimed, suddenly crying continuous tears. “Oh, Starlight!”

A nurse rushed in, her white dress flowing behind her. She had smooth brown hair piled on top of her head. “Oh! Oh! You’re awake!” She checked her pulse and heartbeat and other things. Carla lay perfectly still, plump tears rolling slowly down her cheeks.

She was silent throughout it all as doctors and nurses ran about taking tests and drawing blood from her small chubby arm. She remained silent, tears spilling out of her shiny green eyes, one hand firmly pressed against Starlight’s tank. Carla could tell that it would be a long, long time before she would see the stars again.

The sky was gray as Carla walked up to the grave. It had been two years since the accident where Carla had lost her whole world. Where she had lost her father. As soon as she was released from the hospital, an orphanage had picked her up. “I’m not an orphan,” she had insisted. “My mommy

is just at a hospital. She's sick, you know." Carla was seven now. She hadn't seen her mother since she had been driven away in a police car.

Carla was a little older now. A little taller. A little smarter. And she was smart enough to realize that her mother was not coming home. Though she was taller, her feet had stayed the same size, practically. Her gaze drifted down to her feet, clad in shiny red boots slick from the rain. It was always raining. She looked up at the gray sky again. She hadn't seen the stars since before her mother left. But maybe the sky would clear up soon.

Slowly, Carla knelt in the grass and placed a pure white flower on the wet dirt. "Hey, Daddy. Sorry I haven't seen you in a while. I still love you, just so you know. The orphanage said it was too far, so I had to hitch a ride with Michael. He's the horse guy; he works with the horses in the stable." She brushed her golden curls out of her face. "I still have my boots, and I still have Starlight, though he's getting old. He probably won't make it through the year. But the orphanage says I can get a dog or something when he dies." A sigh slipped from her pink lips. "I'll miss him. But that's okay. I'll get over it." Her hands, slender with youth, drifted across the flower. "This is called an angel flower, Daddy." Quivering, she wrapped her arms around the gravestone and kissed the cold granite. "I'll always be your little Angel. Bye."

With that, she stood and walked slowly away.

Carla had just slipped into her red raincoat when there was a knock on the door. "Come in!" she called out. Her bunkmate, Bella, entered first, holding a rectangular box, her yellow plaid dress swishing around her knees, just the way she liked it. Behind her was Michael, and he was

holding a big object covered with a cloth. “What is it?” Carla asked. Today was her birthday, and she knew she shouldn’t expect too much, but she had been daydreaming of a steady flow of gifts. Yet, while she had hoped for one present, here were her two only friends with parcels.

Bella tucked the box into the bed beside Carla and motioned to Michael. “You go first!”

Michael whipped the cloth off the cage to reveal a small white and blue bird, with dark, intelligent eyes and black markings. She tilted her pudgy head and cooed sweetly. “Happy birthday, Carla,” Michael told her in his twangy voice with a crooked smile.

Gasping in delight, Carla reached out to the miniature bird, her fingers shaking over her open mouth. Her eyes stung as she cried gently. Starlight had died only the day before, and she was okay with that. It was almost as if he had just been there to get her through her mother’s exit and her father’s death. He had lived ridiculously long for a guppy, anyway. And now here was this sweet minute bird, here to get her through the next devastating stage of life. “Oh, Michael – she’s wonderful.”

Bella thrust the box into her hands. “Here, open this now.”

Carla smiled shakily and carefully lifted the lid. “Oh, Bella. You shouldn’t have!” Inside, on a neat bed of pink tissue paper, were two shiny red boots.

“I knew you grew out of your old ones, so I put in a request.” Bella smiled angelically, her white teeth practically glowing in the overhead lights. Carla leaned forward and wrapped her arms around her friend.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“What are you naming your budgie?” Bella asked thoughtfully.

“I don’t know. Maybe...” Michael opened the cage and held his finger out to the bird, who happily hopped onto his calloused brown hand. He then drew the bird ever so carefully to Carla, who copied his example. The budgie stepped onto her finger and cocked her head at Carla. “...Sky!”

“Good name,” Michael commented.

“Yeah,” Carla agreed, smiling happily at Sky.

“Yeah.”

“You know, this kind of doubles as a going away present.” Bella sniffled.

“I know. I’ll miss you all.” She gave them both tight hugs, then placed Sky back in her cage. “I’ll write letters, don’t worry.” Then she slipped into her new red boots, grabbed her bags and the cage, and opened the door. “Goodbye.”

She walked down the hall. Then another one. Finally, she stepped outside and looked up. For the first time in three years, she saw them. The frail, slight girl saw the stars. Millions and millions of stars scattered across the sky, specks of glittering paint tossed on a canvas. As if God sprinkled them on the darkness, just to let anxious people learn to love the night sky. And she could swear there was a bearded man and a fish smiling at her from heaven. Carla lifted a hand and waved to them. From there, she lightheartedly trotted to the subway, where she took train 7 to the third stop.

There, she hurried off with the steady rushing flow of people, lifting her tiny head until she found who she was looking for. The woman had long, silky, honey-blond hair that pooled around her shoulders like a waterfall, with eyes the color of leaves in autumn. She wore her favorite blue cardigan with crisp black pants. She looked better. Her eyes

weren't so baggy, so red, so sad. Her faint freckles were a warm reminder of life before everything went downhill.

Carla raised a hand in a soft wave. Their lives had fallen apart. There was no hope. But as Carla had begun to understand in these past months of hard growth and maturity, as she finally had begun to bloom into the angel blossom she was meant to be, you create your own hope. And that's exactly what they would do.

Carla took a deep breath. "Hi, Mom."

Her mother nodded to her feet. "Nice boots."

"They're from a friend," she explained with a shrug.

"And the bird?" There was one less step between them. Then two.

"Also a friend." She smiled, her chipped tooth glinting in the fluorescent lights. Then there was no space between them. Mother and daughter, reunited after years apart, locked in a grieving, joyful, and, most importantly, hopeful embrace.

Soft, sweet, maternal lips pressed into wild curls the color of spun gold. Slender gloved hands creased the crisp rumples of a red raincoat. Long elegant hand clasped tightly in a small, pale, cold palm, the pair walked toward the old brick house painted with yellow notices. Together, they would create their own hope. And no matter how many clouds covered up the stars, no matter how many loved ones left, there would always be hope. Hope, and red boots.

**Gabriella Hudson  
Silver Lake**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

**I'm Thinkin' the World Doesn't Like Me**

**1. SANDWICH**

I was reaching for the sandwich, the delicious sandwich. It was just out of reach. But then the earth pulled me up. *No! My sandwich!* I thought. As I was pinned to the ceiling, drooling over my sandwich, oh no! Zero gravity! It flew up. I dodged. *Can't fool me!* I dropped hard – on my head. *OH, UNICORNS! NO, THEY'RE EATING MY SANDWICH!* The sandwich, gone. I started thinking the world doesn't like me. With nothing left to mope about, I crawled outside. The earth pulled me up again. I could see Saturn and Pluto – was Pluto a planet again? But then I realized... *I can't breathe. Oh well!* When I plummeted down to earth I broke a bone or two, but they weren't mine. They were my aunt's, who was randomly standing where I was falling. Squirrels attacked me to welcome me home!

**2. CAVING**

The floor seemed very sturdy as I fell onto it. Then it slanted, and I slipped down into a hole. I let it pull me down and it turned into a trampoline. It bounced me up and out of the hole. I did a flip, but not a very good one. As I landed, the floor was hard and slippery and crumbly. NOT TODAY, I thought.

As I fell down,

and down,

and down,

it felt like forever, but just like that it was normal again. *WHAT A DAY*, I thought as I slipped into bed, sleeping through the rollercoaster of night.

### 3. ROLLERCOASTER

My bed flew down. Good thing I'd tucked myself in! I woke up under the floorboards, still on the ride. "Ahhhhh!" Actually, it wasn't that scary, more like "ahh!" in a refreshing way. Suddenly I was in Arizona! My favorite state! I flew across the sand into what I thought was a beach but was actually a screen. *NO NOT ALASKA!* I thought shivering, and then in a snap I was home. *The earth definitely hates me. I just don't know why. The world can't kill me, can it? No, it can't! No matter what it does I will still be sane.* Then ice cream appeared. *NOPE, NOT FALLING FOR IT, EARTH!* So it turns out I was right – it was a trick. I called for help and the phone hung up. *They just don't understand!*

### 4. NOBODY UNDERSTANDS

My nosy old neighbor, Ms. McDonald (who never told her love that she liked him), asked me about my weekend

(even though it's Wednesday). Did I mention she's deaf?  
 "I'm going to the mall!" I yelled from my window.

"You're mowing a ball?" Ms. McDonald said. "Dear, I'm concerned."

"Watch where you're WALKING!" I shouted at her.

"WHAT?" she shouted back as she stepped in her dog, Sol's business. I face palmed and quickly ducked out of my window as it shut with a slam. I didn't even shut it! Sol started barking like a maniac and then an asteroid fell on my house. Somehow I survived. *WHY IS IT SO IMPOSSIBLE TO HAVE A NORMAL DAY FOR ONCE?*

It's been an hour since the asteroid attack and I reconstructed my house, kinda. But another asteroid fell on what I reconstructed and turned it into a campfire. At least I don't have to sleep in the cold! I grabbed my ashy pillow and had a nice, good sleep. Little did I know my supposed pillow was a spring. It shot me into space, and since space is colder than outside (trust me, I know, you would too if you were paying attention to this story), and I guess there's no oxygen, I woke up. When someone disturbs my sleep, it's like fighting with the world for them.

## 5. GAIA THE EARTH GODDESS

Gaia was in my dream last night and said I have interfered with the protectors of Earth. Honestly, she could have been more specific. *What protectors of Earth? Why aren't they protecting me?! I'm the one who has horrible things that happen every day to me! Instead they're just*



*lounging around like there's nothing in the world that's happening!* Anyway, it was just a dream. I think. Whatever! But, I decided to walk on it. Eating a new sandwich, I was surprised nothing bad happened... until the end. I was walking and I finished the sandwich and suddenly, I COULDN'T WALK! I had wet cement bricks on my feet! Those were my favorite shoes! As I trudged (or *STUMBLER* MORE LIKE IT) to my beautiful house, er... what's left of it, I came across an old friend, THE PAPARAZZI! They took so many pictures of my awesome block-feet and my gorgeous hair! I was rocking it!

## 6. RECYCLING?!

I did some research, and I thought a lot about the question, *What does Earth suffer from?* Well, garbage is a BIG takeaway, but doesn't everybody litter at one point? I obviously try not to, so that must not be it. I thought some more, I thought very hard, and I came up with ...RECYCLING!

**I've never once recycled.**

`No wonder my aunt is hospitalized and my mother is in WHEREVERTHEHECKISTAN.

I'm going to start now, here, this paper, IN THE TRASH! I mean, IN THE RECYCLING!

AFTER THAT...

Life turned back to normal. I had school (as always). My aunt is now out of medical care and in a fancy wheelchair. Almost forgot! I'M FREE! I have a new house (no worries, getting a new one was easy), and you'll never believe this: THE WORLD DOES LIKE ME! I think.

*A VERY SPECIAL NOTE...*

*Absolutely no aunts were harmed in the making of this story.*

**Lexie Overvaag**  
**Luverne**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

### **A Home for Christmas**

It's getting to be that time of year again. I scramble across the dark, damp street, barely avoiding a lime-green station wagon. After hurrying into an alleyway, I wash my paws, which are, by now, filthy. It's hard to clean them, but I do. After a while, most of the mud is gone and I'm left with my regular orange fur. I'm exhausted now, too tired to continue cleaning, or to even attempt to wash my entire body. I flop down and tuck my thin tail over my nose. Reminiscent dreams haunt my meager sleep, overtaking my body with the occasional involuntary meow.

When I wake up, hands are grabbing me around my waist. I squirm out of them with a squeak and a hiss. I whip around and glare at the possessor of the hands. I *hate* those big, messy, groping mitts of *humans*. It wasn't always like that, though. I hiss again, backing away slowly.

The human is male, tall, and strong. He smells like the woods, which relaxes me some. There are no woods in town, though, so I don't know why he smells like that. He kneels and shows his teeth. It takes me a minute to realize that he's smiling, which is what humans do when they're happy. I watch him intently, eyeing his every move for fear of capture. The human reaches into a brown bag and retrieves a small sliver of chicken. *Meat*. The heavenly aroma overwhelms me as I pad closer. He holds out the food in his heavy fingers and watches me, blinking slowly.

Now we're talking. I prowl forward, then pace before him, unsure of whether or not to take the delicious morsel. He leans out, and I stubbornly remain where I am. I stretch to grasp the meat, and jerk back to wolf it down. "Good kitty," I hear him murmur.

I don't even mind. I lick my lips thoroughly, lest I lose any of the precious flavor. I look up at him and mewl pitifully, asking, *Do you have any more?*

He laughs and reaches out to brush his giant hands against my fur. I shy away and watch him. "Can I take you home, kitty?" he asks softly, holding out his hand for me to sniff. Finally, after I finish licking his chicken-stained fingers, he lifts me into the air. I squeak and squirm, but do not escape from his gentle, yet firm hands. He carries me all the way to his home.

Then he brings me inside.

I am immediately hit in the face with delicious scents: aromas of ham, cinnamon, warm ginger... I am in heaven. The human releases me. I land on a soft carpet that warms my paws. At this instant, I see it. An intimidatingly titanic viridian tree, towering in a corner of the room. I remember the last time I saw one of those.

*I was placed in a big cardboard box with air holes and scooted under the tree. I smelled evergreen and forest scents. I waited. Soon enough, I heard pattering footsteps as children thundered down the stairs.*

*"Who's this for?" a girl yowled, grabbing my box and yanking it to her. I scrabbled for footholds.*

*"That's for you, Charlotte," the mother of the family answered.*

*I meowed, and she opened the lid to stare at me. I stared back. "Kitty!" she yelled. She crushed her hands around me and heaved me into the air. I growled and hissed,*

*kicking my feet as she ruffled my fur abrasively. Then she touched my ears.*

*I screamed and slammed my hind feet against her, claws out, and slashed with my front paws. My ears flattened, and I yowled in anger. She dropped me, all the way to the floor, and I felt my leg twist. I hissed one more time and attempted to scuttle under the tree. But the mother scooped me up in a more comfortable position and stroked my fur gently.*

*"I'm bleeding!" Charlotte hollered, snot and tears promptly running down her face.*

*"It's okay, baby," her mother crooned, rubbing me under the chin. "You gotta be gentle with kitties." She pulled the father to the side, releasing me. "Carl, I told you we shouldn't have gotten her a cat," she hissed, lowering her voice.*

*Meanwhile, Charlotte turned to her other presents, then looked at her arm. Three thin lines puffed up on her skin, beads of blood popping up. She glared at me and gave me a swift kick. "Bad cat!"*

*"Charlotte Emily Johnson!" her mother exclaimed as I limped away as quickly as I could.*

*Suddenly, the front door opened and a teenage boy swaggered in. I knew an opportunity when I saw one. Quick as a flash, I darted out the door into the cold. "Woah!" the boy exclaimed as I lunged past him on three legs.*

*"The cat!" yelled the mother.*

*"Let 'im go," the father grumbled, shutting the door.*

*I hurried into an alleyway and snuggled down in some old trash bags. After overwashing my snapped leg, I fell into a restless sleep. I had never been outside before. I was five weeks old. My broken leg healed crooked. And I lived as an alley cat, untamable, for a whole year.*

*Until now.*

I listen fearfully as pattering feet run down the stairs. I hear a girl's voice call, "Mason's home!" I watch in dread as the girl comes into view.

She is sleek, lanky, and slim, her cerulean leggings accentuating her long-leggedness. Her hair is fluorescent orange and frizzy, and her face is extremely freckled. Her eyes are bright green and reflect the light around her. She gasps upon seeing me. "Kitty!" she exclaims, a childish grin growing on her face.

I watch nervously as she approaches and kneels before me. I mew and cower. She reaches out a cautious hand and croons gently, "Oh! Mason, he's all muddy! Poor dear."

"He was in the street," Mason explains, reaching down to pat me softly. "And I thought, 'I'll take him home to Maddy. She'll take care of him.' And I was right, wasn't I, little guy?"

"You were," Maddy agrees, stroking my fur. "He needs a bath." She races off, and I, curious about this nice girl, follow her into the bathroom. She runs warm water into the bathtub, plugs the drain, and sings sea shanties to me while we wait for the water. Her voice is loud and strong, yet clear at the highest notes.

*"And the ocean's waves do roll!*

*And the stormy winds do blow,*

*And we poor sailors are skipping at the top*

*While the landlubbers line down below, below,*

*below!*

*While the landlubbers line down below!"*

By the time the tub is full, she has sung two songs: "The Mermaid" and "The Wellerman." She tests the water, still humming, and gently lifts me. "Okay, boy, in you go!" I mewl as she lowers me into the steaming water. The mud, which has become a second layer of fur, becomes wet and

begins to peel off. In a short amount of time, I am drenched and orange once again, and the water has turned murky brown.

Maddy picks me up again, lays me on a soft, pink, fluffy towel, and bundles me up. She rubs me dry and scoops me up, then places me on the sink. The cool marble is cold on my toes. I stare in the mirror at my swaddled form. Maddy removes my towel, and I am greeted with the sight of myself. My fur has returned to its regular orange creamsicle shade, with darker tabby stripes, and I am fluffy once more. I look at Maddy's eyes in the glass. We are alike with our shining green eyes. Then I do something I haven't done in a very long time.

I purr.

Grinning at me, Maddy picks me up and carries me into the living room. "Behold, the magnificent tabby!" she hollers, lifting me high above her. I let out a small mew.

Sitting on the couches and the floor are the rest of her family, all of whom I soon learn the names. Her mother smiles at me, patting her leg. Maddy obliges and settles on Mother's knee, leaning back against her with me on her lap.

"So we have a cat now?" Mother laughs, not unkindly, scratching my spine with her nails.

"Yep," Maddy smirks, rubbing my chin. "We need to name him, though."

"How do you know it's a him?" asks her older brother Matt.

Maddy leans down and steals his baseball cap, planting it firmly on her own head. "I just do, *Matthias*."

Malachi, her other older brother, is sitting next to Matt. He pulls up his hood and squints at me. "Cute," he murmurs, touching my nose gently with his warm fingers.

Maddy's father pets me tentatively. "What are we naming him?"

“It should start with ‘M’,” Mason, the eldest child, reminds him.

Maddy’s little brother, Maddox, speeds to my side to stroke my tail. “We should name him Mickey!”

“We are *not* naming him after Mickey Mouse.”

Maddy rolls her eyes and kisses my head. I haven’t stopped purring.

“Hot dog, hot dog, hot diggety dog,” Maddox sings softly, hopping away on one foot, quoting the *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* theme song all the while.

“Milo,” Malachi declares quietly, looking up at his younger sister. “That’s what we should name him.”

“Yeah, Milo!” Maddy agrees, drumming her fingers on my spine.

“Like *Milo and Otis*!” Maddox exclaims, always TV obsessed.

“Milo,” Father murmurs, testing it out. He looks a lot like Maddy; the same hair and eyes. I look at his lap. He has a red and black plaid blanket spread across his knees, and it just looks so comfy. I slip across Mother’s lap and into his, and begin kneading his knees. “Woah there,” he laughs softly.

“Can we open presents *now*?” Maddox groans, flopping across Mason.

Five pairs of eyes turn upon Mom and Dad. “Sure,” Mother shrugs. The four young children eagerly gather under the tree, reading labels and handing them out to the correct owners. My ears perk at barking outside.

“I’ll get her,” Matt offers, jumping to his feet and bounding to the door. He returns with a huge black dog. She is a Belgian Sheepdog, with tall pointed ears, and snowflakes speckling her fluffy fur.

“Marley, come meet Milo!” Maddy giggles, calling the dog over. Marley perks up and sniffs the air, then trots



over to the couch, her wide pink tongue lolling out of her mouth. I watch her cautiously. Let's just say I haven't had the best experiences with dogs.

She noses my fur and I pull back, unsure. She licks my cheek. I sit still for a moment, then hiss softly, not really meaning it. It just seems like the right thing to do. I bat at her nose gently, my claws retracted. Marley whines and smiles, licks me again just to spite me, and hurries away to roll on Malachi's lap.

As the family open their gifts and thank one another, I feel an odd sense of peace and warmth. It's not just the crackling fireplace, or the smell of hot chocolate, it's something else. I survey the room until I spot a small wooden box on an end table. I leap from Dad's lap, limp as quickly as I can to the table, and jump on its smooth surface. It's not a box. It's a stable, and it has little wooden figurines, painted messily by Maddox. One of them draws me to it. I curl up around the small boxy shape, careful not to knock anything over.

"He's laying on Baby Jesus," Maddox whispers, setting aside his new racecar to come look at me.

Matthias tucks his partially unwrapped paintbrushes into his pocket and watches me calmly. "He's so sweet." Suddenly, feeling an urge, he stands, rips the rest of the paper off the brushes and grabs a canvas and paints. He looks at me, then at his painting as he works.

"It's like he knows how special that one is," Mother breathes, smoothing one of Maddy's renegade curls.

I watch them for a while as they watch me, not bothering to continue their unwrapping. Finally, Matt sets his canvas down and signs it MO with a flourish. I stand and yawn, hopping down and into Malachi's lap. He pets me with the lightest touch of his fingertips. Mother stands and

brings two bowls of popcorn out, which everyone shares. I am even gifted with several delicious salty puffs.

As the family festivities continue, I cycle from lap to lap, so as not to cause strife. Mason goes and sits at the piano, and Maddy grabs her guitar, and they strum and plink out notes, everyone singing their hearts out. Father brings out his viola and plays along. The sweet, tender notes to “Silent Night” float through the air as I curl up beside Marley to sleep. As the melody to “I Heard the Bells” is filled by Maddy’s sweet alto, the snow falls gently outside, landing as softly as a feather upon the frost. I yawn and close my eyes, hiding my nose in Marley’s fluff.

It dawns on me now that this is what I was missing. Last year, I was lost and alone and unwanted. But now, today, tonight, I have a family. I have a *home* for Christmas. And I wouldn’t change a thing.

**NONFICTION**  
**Grades 7 & 8**



**Lexie Overvaag  
Luverne**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

**King of the Wind**

He is King of the Wind: Kairos, a giant, black, shimmering Friesian, with powerful muscles rippling under an obsidian coat flecked with chestnut.

His owner, a tall woman, who was wearing a green tank top with the logo of the ranch, was holding his lead as I stroked his shoulder. She is a fellow volunteer at the horse ranch in Hills, and owns the most incredible horse in the world. She turned to me and told me I could ride Kairos if I wanted. I swear, my jaw must have literally dropped open. I stared into her blue eyes, and questioned, disbelieving, if I really could. She laughed and asked how old I was.

“Twelve. No, wait, thirteen!” I corrected when she began to speak, my body quivering with anticipation. She confirmed I could, if I wore a helmet and asked my mother first. I agreed, walking quickly down the line of stalls, where my mom was standing, adjusting her camera. “Mom, I’m riding Kairos!” I exclaimed, my legs shaky from excitement, which affects me in strange ways.

“Great!” She looked up from her tiny camera screen with a shiny white smile. My mother is a photographer, and has an extremely pretty smile.

I headed into the tack room, wondering where the helmets were. After racking my brain, I recalled from my first day volunteering that the line of helmets was on the top of a similar line of lockers on the wall. I slipped into a white

helmet, first in line, realized suddenly it was too big, and tried another. It also was rather loose, so time for helmet #3! I stuffed my head into it, snapped the clip shut, and headed out the door, tightening the straps as I went back to the indoor arena. There stood Kairos, his long wavy black mane flowing in the slight wind, and his owner. Still fiddling with my helmet, I stepped onto the soft golden sand.

Then I looked up, up, up at where I would need to sit. Kairos' owner boosted me up, after I had twisted my tennis shoe (borrowed from my mother) into the stirrup. And then, gripping the saddle horn and seat, I hoisted myself up onto Kairos' wide back. Just being up there filled me with exhilaration. Even now, I feel my stomach twisting when I think of him and the chance to ride him. His owner immediately unclipped his orange lead rope and began instructing me on how to hold his reins (low, letting them rest on his neck) and how to ride him (showing him who's in charge). She taught me to turn him by pulling on the reins, making sure they flop over his neck, and pressing with my other foot on the opposite side. The giant beast felt as strong as a rhinoceros beneath me, yet as graceful as a gazelle.

After a while of wrestling to keep Kairos from greeting his owner, being praised for it, told that I'm doing perfect, and my mouth aching from smiling so hard, I asked, rather shyly, if I could try a trot.

In response, she hollered to my mother, "Mom! Is it alright if she does a nice, slow, trot?" My mother nodded (she's fairly lax about me and horses, since I have plenty of experience) and Kairos' owner called to me to kick and click with energy once I was lined up with the wall. I obeyed, rocking back and coming forward rippling with all the anticipation bottled up inside me, nudging his sides with my heels. Following my teacher's directions, I let the reins go slack. And then he transitioned from walking swiftly to the

smoothest trot I have ever experienced. And for just a few seconds, we were one beast, moving fluently, our motions liquid.

Then it was over and we were done. I had been informed previously that only his owner, one volunteer, and another who unfortunately had passed away before I could meet her, rode Kairos. But I, at thirteen, was probably one of the youngest to ride this majestic beast. And I am in love with him, with riding on his back while he arches his elegant neck, in love with stroking his velvety nose, even in love with simply leading him around. But it was over too soon, and I was drawing him in, and sliding off him without assistance other than someone holding him still. Then I was helping keep a tough 96-year-old on Phoenix, a small, sleepy, buckskin mare. After she was done, I led one of the helpers of the nursing home. She was on Kairos. When everyone was done, Kairos' owner told me I could put him in his stall, or...

I could ride him again. Obviously, I chose the latter. And I was back up in the air, floating, flowing, our bodies in sync as I let mine move with his. I heard positive comments from Kairos' owner as she chatted with my mother. I was told after I touched his soft black ears that that meant we had a strong bond. Apparently, he has had some sort of unknown trauma involving his ears. Later, my mom told me his owner thinks I might be able to help with his problems. Because he *likes* me.

Kairos likes me.

I painted a picture of him, creating a gradient orange background and painting his gorgeous curved nose, then adding blue and brown highlights. I carefully crafted a large gentle brown eye, then spread a wavy black, blue, and brown mane, his bangs falling into his face.

This painting, I have decided, is of a king. His name is Kairos. He is King of the Wind.



**Annie Scandrett**  
**Slayton**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

### **A Crazy Canada Trip**

An adventure. Those are the only two words that I can possibly think of that truly and utterly describe this past summer's Canada trip that I took with my dad. Yes, we knew that we may have some difficulties, but never in our dreams would we have expected all that we experienced that week. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning...

It had always been my dream to go to Canada, and the summer after I turned thirteen, I was finally old enough to go. I knew this would be a difficult trip, but I was determined. To make things a little bit easier, my dad already had a spot on the Turtle River, so he knew how to navigate our way to the campsite. Now, you must understand, this was not a manmade campsite! My dad had found this *nature-*made campsite on one of his first fishing trips and had made it his own.

Anyway, we set out on our way at the beginning of the second week of July. As we were driving further and further north in Minnesota, my dad and I had some really great conversations about faith and life in general.

After several hours of driving, we stopped for supper and continued along to Bemidji, where we would spend the night at a hotel before crossing the Canadian border the next morning. We hadn't booked a hotel ahead of time, so we assumed that there would be a hotel with at least one open room at a reasonable price. First, we went to the AmericInn. We asked the man at the counter if there were any rooms

available, but every one was taken! Then we ventured onto several more hotels, but not a single one had a room open that was not a ridiculous price. Finally, after trying many, MANY hotels, we were able to get a room at Country Inn & Suites.

After a great night's sleep and a delicious hotel breakfast the next morning, we began our journey to International Falls, where we would cross the border. Once we arrived, we took a quick stop at Menards to grab a few supplies that we would need for the remainder of the trip. Then, we pulled up behind a long line of cars waiting to cross into Canada. When it was our turn, the border police asked us about our plans and about the supplies that we had along with us. He told us we could pull on through into Canada. When we were across, I looked around, taking in all the new sights. Things looked slightly different, but fairly similar to how things looked back in the U.S.

We drove for about a half an hour or so, then stopped at a small little gas station and souvenir shop called Great Bear that was off to the side of the road. After buying a few extra snacks, we continued on, but to our horror, the transmission on our vehicle began to go out! Although we tried to keep going at first, we had to turn around and go back to Great Bear to evaluate the situation.

When we arrived, my dad cut the engine and began to speak. "I don't know what to do, Annie. I want to keep going, but even though we can still go around thirty miles per hour, it's just too risky to keep on going right now because the transmission could go out at any time. Then we would be stranded!"

"I know. It's just that I really, REALLY want to go to your spot," I responded, beginning to feel downhearted.

“How about this? We’ll go into the shop and you can pick out some souvenirs while I talk to the cashier about our situation. Okay?”

“All right,” I murmured quietly. We headed inside and I went to look at the clothing in the souvenir area. I found a really nice sweatshirt, along with a t-shirt that I couldn’t take my eyes off of. We checked out and headed back to our suburban, the cashier wishing us good luck.

“Well, I guess we’ll head back to International Falls and maybe look at some rental vehicles,” my dad said.

“Okay,” I sighed. It was a bummer that we couldn’t just go through with our original plans, but at least there was a possibility of still getting to go on our fishing trip.

After crossing the border once again, where the officer helped to reassure us, we headed to the nearest airport and talked to some rental services. None of the rental vehicles were built for an outdoorsy kind of trip, though, where things may get scratched and dirty. When it seemed that we would have to turn around and head back home, a man from a shuttle service came over to talk to us.

“Hey, I’m Randy. I heard about you and your daughter’s trip, and I thought that maybe I could help. Although I work for a shuttle service, we have some older cars that we could maybe rent to you,” Randy offered.

“Really? That would be great!” my dad exclaimed. “But the car could get a little beat up. It’s a pretty rough gravel road, and I can’t promise that we won’t pop a tire or anything.”

“Where are you headed?” Randy asked.

“We’re headed to Turtle River, but we’re entering on Kenorain Creek. There’s a logging road that heads back that way,” my dad explained.

“No way! I’ve been on that road before for some of *my* fishing trips! I don’t enter the same place that you do, but I do know that road.”

“That’s crazy!”

“Yeah, well, I think we have some cars that might work for you.”

“That’s great! Thanks!”

After we arrived at the building for the shuttle service, Randy showed us the vehicle that he had available. “The only thing is that its transmission can sometimes be a little funny,” Randy explained. My dad and I glanced at each other. “But it’s still very reliable, and we’ve been driving it for years,” he went on.

“Okay. We’ll take it,” my dad said hesitantly. We transferred our gear and crossed the border AGAIN. We were lucky that the border police didn’t think we were criminals or anything, especially since we were using different cars!

We passed Great Bear once again and then continued on to the logging road. After a VERY bumpy ride, we pulled off to the side of the road at the spot where we would enter Kenorain Creek. We discovered that we had one flat tire, so thank goodness my dad had asked Randy for a spare before we left. My dad tried to get the flat tire off, but it wouldn’t budge! We just had to hope that we would be able to get it off when we came back to the car after our trip.

We loaded all of our gear into our canoe and began the four mile paddle we would have to take to get to Turtle River. The creek was full of weeds and had several beaver dams we had to get out and pull the canoe over, some being up to three feet tall! We also saw some otters, as well as a mother duck and her ducklings, who she was fiercely trying to protect from us. After an hour or two of paddling and singing ‘Land Of The Silver Birch,’ we finally arrived at our

campsite on Turtle River. As soon as we pulled up on land, I immediately paused, listening to the strange buzzing sound that was so loud that I could hardly hear anything else!

“What is that?” I shouted to my dad.

“Mosquitoes!” he yelled back. And all of a sudden I felt them, little needles sticking into my flesh, covering themselves all over my body. I dropped everything and tried to shoo them away, but they wouldn’t budge! My dad told me to just keep going and to help set up the tent so we could get away from the mosquitoes.

Later that evening while my dad was quickly cooking some venison over the campfire (which tasted delicious I might add) I was walking circle after circle around our tent, trying to keep myself from going crazy. But every time I looked down, the view was the same. Hundreds of mosquitoes covering my legs. (And no, I’m not exaggerating.) Later that night after we ate supper, we finally crawled into our tent. After playing a few card games, we drifted off to sleep.

The next morning when I crawled out into the open I was amazed at the view I saw around me. It was so scenic. No, that wasn’t the word. It was breathtaking! I couldn’t help but gasp with awe at the beauty that God had placed here on the Turtle River.

Later that day when we were out on the water smallmouth bass fishing (which I have to admit I was pretty good at), a large fish suddenly bit my line. I jerked backwards and tried to reel it in, but as soon as I could see it and discovered it was a Northern, it escaped! It was still so much fun, though. After doing some exploring on Eltrut Lake, which is right by Turtle River, we headed back to the campsite.

The next morning, we had a delicious breakfast of lumberjack pancakes with freshly picked blueberries that we

had found on our campsite. I can honestly say those were the best pancakes I had ever had. Each day continued on the same schedule wise, but we always seemed to discover something new every time that we went out fishing. After a few days, it was time to say goodbye to my new home. I was so sad to be leaving it, because not only had it been so beautiful and a place where I was able to find peace, but it held so many new memories that my dad and I had made that week.

Once we canoed out on Kenorain Creek and unloaded our gear, my dad went to try to get the tire off the car. Thank goodness he was able to break it free! But after putting the spare on, I immediately realized that something was wrong. The spare was WAY too small! My dad tried driving with it, but it just dragged along the ground and, believe it or not, the spare was also flat. “This is NOT good,” my dad said quietly.

“It’ll be okay, Dad,” I replied. Although I agreed with him, I knew we had our Garmin Messenger, which is basically a walkie-talkie that you can text a few words on. Our phones wouldn’t work because we were very remote and we weren’t in the U.S. We texted Randy, who said that he wouldn’t be able to come and help us for probably another seven hours! My dad finally decided that it would at least save us some time if we could get to the end of the logging road and down by the highway, so he attempted to try and fill our first popped tire with ten year old tire sealant. It worked, and we spent the rest of the day sleeping and reading by the highway. We only had a little bit of water, though, so we had to be careful about how much we drank.

Later, after Randy had rescued us and we were headed back on the long road home in our own vehicle, I began to reflect on our trip. There is definitely lots of time to reflect when you are driving thirty miles an hour down the

highway due to a failing transmission! I realized that although this trip had been hard, it had also been a wonderful experience to learn a lesson. Over the course of our adventure, I had begun to understand that no matter the circumstance, God always has a plan for us, and he will always take care of us if we trust in him.

So we continued down the road, cars passing us and horns blaring, but my smile was as big as could be. I knew that I would never, ever forget this trip.

**Lexie Overvaag  
Luverne**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

**Bravery**

It was the twenty-sixth of November. My family and I, minus my adult sister, were playing Phase 10. I had just discarded a red four, which my other sister rejected blatantly. She did her turn swiftly and announced it was my mother's turn. I can't recall what happened next, if Mom took her turn or not. My sister pointed to our long gravel driveway and called that there was a truck. Sure enough, when I turned to look, there was a sleek black truck rumbling down the driveway. It had fancy headlights. A young man climbed out. He was wearing bright orange. He was a hunter.

The man, who was most likely in his twenties, hurried to our garage and knocked on the door. My mother, sister, and I commented that he was at the wrong door. I am *possibly* slightly biased against hunters. Recently, I had met a quiet, soft dun doe, standing in our horse pasture. Instantly, I loved her. Because we have five cats who prowl and hunt outside, plus two rescue horses who spook at the slightest sounds, we have a *No Hunting* sign at the start of our quarter-of-a-mile gravel driveway. Finally, the man hurried to our front door, where my father was ready to meet him.

I watched out the window, pressed close against the antique piano. I kept a tough face on, just in case the man spotted me in the window, so he would know that I didn't want him here. My sister was making puns about how he would be so creeped out if he saw us all watching him talk to my dad. There was a lot of pointing in various directions, towards our woods, or back at the driveway. Then the man



nodded and slipped back to his truck. My father came back inside. He told us that the man had ‘hit’ a deer and that it had run off into our woods, and he wanted to finish it off. My father had informed him that he could go around and look for it, but *no guns*. The risk of our horses spooking was just too great since they were rescues and had past trauma.

Forcefully, he added that the hunters didn’t *dare* shoot any cats. And our horses better not freak out and jump the fence. The men drove a few feet down the gravel, then parked and started off in the direction of our duck house. “I thought you told them to go to the grove,” I muttered worriedly, switching windows. Then the men began striding towards our horse pasture.

“If they climb the fence, I’m gonna *beat* them,” my sister hissed threateningly. The horses are really hers, and she is very protective of them. My dad grabbed his coat, intending to go after them. While he was busy, my sister raised her voice in warning. “They’re climbing the fence.”

I grabbed a bright blue jacket, stuffed myself into it, and rushed to the garage, slamming my feet into my muck boots. Thankfully, I had been wearing socks, so that saved time. I poked my head back into the house and called out, “I’m going out there!” To my surprise, my mother didn’t stop me. I went flat-out running on the dirt to the pasture and scrambled over the gate, then rushed out to the rented pasture, as we call it. By then, the men in orange had passed through and climbed the other fence. The older one had a beard. When they saw me approaching, Mr. Beard led the other man over to the fence. He tripped over the dry creek. “Oh, there’s a creek!”

“Yeah,” I dead-panned. I was furious with them. Without letting them reply, I continued sharply yet politely, “Can you please stay out of the pastures? And please go back into the fields.”

“Oh, yeah.” They turned and started in the other direction. I watched them go, then started back to the barn and to our horses, who were watching. I wasn’t ready to go back inside. It was a good thing I trusted my gut. I could tell the horses were wary by their flaring nostrils. I hadn’t felt the cold during my storm to the barn, but now I did. I stroked our thick white gelding, Shadow, and watched the orange flicker by through the trees. The other horse, a tall ruddy thoroughbred named Red, nuzzled me, then turned away. The three of us were watching the hunters disappear into the forest when I heard a pop. Shadow jerked away with a kick and small rear, the old horse’s front hooves higher than I had ever seen them. Red, on the other hand, did a full on rear. “Woaaaah, boys! It’s ooooookay!” The two geldings snorted fearfully, but calmed. It was then that I realized that the noise was a gunshot. My stomach twisted and it felt like there were thousands of butterflies scrambling around my insides. Adrenaline pumped through me as I stormed toward the closed creek pasture, then changed direction and climbed over a different gate, out of the pasture. Then I heard my mom calling my name just as I turned toward the trail that leads through the woods to our cabin. I trotted towards where my mom stood, wearing her green chore jumpsuit and a bright cherry-red stocking cap.

“Are they near the cabin?” she yelled to me from across the lawn.

“I don’t know – I’ll check!” I replied bravely.

“Baby, you could get shot!” she hollered, stepping forward. I started crying and ran to her. She told me to go back to the horses, and I did. Red followed me around like a guilty puppy, nose down to the ground like he wanted to roll. He was doing the same thing to me that he did to the cats when he wanted them out of the pasture. After many soothing words and promises of “We’ll make those hunters

leave and never come back” through glassy tears, I left. Alarmed, I climbed over the gate and watched Red’s long legs flail in the air as he rolled on his belly. Then I ran toward Mom, intending to tell her of the orange I’d just spotted near the cabin. I slowed down when I saw Mr. Beard and the young man with her. Mom turned and called to me, “You okay, honey?”

My body quivering, I replied tearfully with a wavering voice, “Yeah.” By this point, big sobs were heaving through me. Hearing Mr. Beard say something, I sent my hardest, meanest glare at them, not knowing that it was an apology, and slammed the door as I plunged into the garage. I smacked my boots off and rushed into the house, failing to quiet my tears. Although my father immediately tried to comfort me, comfort wasn’t what I needed. I wasn’t sad or scared.

I was mad.

My sister, being the responsible woman she is, understood that and looked out the window, watching two more orange figures waltz out to their vehicle. I told her that there was a second truck, a white one, parked at the end of the driveway. She nodded knowingly and motioned to one of the hunters, who was probably shorter than I am. He was a young boy, most likely a couple years younger than me. We tried to figure out if the dad had sent his other son to distract us, or if they hadn’t been told my father’s *No Gun* policy, because the dad was proudly carting a big, complicated, black rifle over his shoulder. My sister kept saying abrasively in her clear, confident voice, “The *big* butts.” The man wasn’t carrying anything other than his gun, so he obviously couldn’t have actually *gotten* the deer. Upon entering the house, Mom came to me and wrapped her arms around me, promptly summarizing her conversation with Mr. Beard and Young Man. When she informed them that I was

with the horses when the shot went off, and that they were lucky I didn't get trampled, Mr. Beard apologized and seemed genuinely sorry, calling out to me. Mom continued to say that since the deer had gone in the direction of our neighbors' house, their buck was gone. This gentle man feeds the deer, and would never allow anyone to shoot them. That night, after telling the story to four people, I got sick from the excitement. But I do not regret having gone after those hunters. Because I am brave, and there is no taking that away from me.

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



**Melanie Engels**  
**Ivanhoe**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

### **A Snow Day**

Outside it was snowing.  
 The cold winds still were blowing, blowing, blowing,  
 until they blew themselves out.  
 "Hooray!" my sisters and I shouted.  
 Such running and rushing and scrambling transpired,  
 as we ran to the spire  
 of the snow mountain.  
 We slipped and slid as we raced to the summit,  
 all trying to win it.  
 Yet alas! I could not win,  
 but was forced to climb all the way up again.  
 As they tired, the game ceased,  
 and we fell into a heap,  
 exhausted. Then the roar of snowmobiles came  
 through the air. A new game!  
 We jumped into the white fluff,  
 then hurried inside to put on warmer stuff.  
 Decked in scarves, hats and gloves,  
 to get outside you had to shove,  
 since we all clustered by the door to be first.  
 My bubble was like to burst,  
 for off they had gone,  
 leaving me behind.  
 Suddenly, like a burst of song,  
 came a roar, then a gold streak,  
 then they stopped right by my feet.  
 "Hop in the sleigh!" they cried, as one made room by her  
 side.  
 We took off on our ride  
 as if we were in a race.

White snowballs began flying through the sky  
when the Diablo\* passed us by.  
After that, chunks flew thick.  
I threw some back, then packed snow into round bricks  
so I could throw them back again.  
Hours passed and we went in,  
chilled to the bone under the layers of fleece,  
all of us ready to feast  
on hot chili and fresh bread.  
With an occasional corny joke from our dad,  
we discussed the fun we'd had.

\*1969 Diablo Rouge snowmobile



**Trina Vo  
Marshall**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

**The Distance**

The earth aims its love upwards  
towards the moon, its praises unheard.  
For the moon does not reciprocate  
and, year-by-year, drifts away

**Katie Johnson**  
**Bingham Lake**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

**My Best Friend**

There's this girl I know, she's one of a kind,  
She's unique, clever – with a really smart mind.  
She's sweet and special and a little bit shy,  
But she'll talk off your head if you give her a try.  
She's fun, funny, and always makes me laugh  
Unfortunately, we do most of that during math.  
We've made many memories over the last few years,  
Joy, laughter, sadness and tears.  
Our friendship is different – of course in a good way.  
It's different because we know it will stay.  
So to this girl that I will always love to no end,  
I am so thankful that you will always be my best friend.

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



**Nate Noble  
Marshall**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

**A Story for Grandpa**

“Well, what do you say, sounds good?” Those words led to an amazing adventure.

How did we get here? What led to this ‘amazing’ adventure? Let’s go back to where it started: June 19, 2023. We went down to Grandma and Grandpa’s to help clean up around the house and the yard. Grandma went outside to show off her garden, while I stayed inside with Grandpa. He opened the new Fur-Fish-Game magazine, fresh out of the mailbox.

“Look at this,” said Grandpa. “This guy took a trip up north and shot a massive turkey just north of Brainerd.”

“Really? Sounds like quite the trip. I bet that guy had a blast. You know, I think that’s what we should do. During MEA break, we go somewhere up north, and hunt some turkey dinner. Who knows, maybe we’ll get a bird that won’t even fit in the oven.”

“You know Nate, years ago, I would always go turkey hunting, and I know that you are getting into hunting, and I would love to take you. I will talk to Mary and Sue and see what they see. But yes, turkey hunting was quite the treat. Well, what do you say, sounds good?” said Grandpa.

“Really, that would be awesome,” said an awe-struck Nate. “I know that Mom would say yes. It would be an incredible experience for sure!”

Grandma and Mom approved and that’s where the adventure started. Grandpa and I went to Borch’s and Runnings to get gear for the hunting trip. I contacted a friend

from Alexandria, and he hooked us up with some of his land up north.

“Well, just got off the phone with a friend, and he said we got his land for three days; 100 acres. We’ve got October 18-20<sup>th</sup>,” said Nate.

“100 acres, you say. That’s as much as a corn field. Well, we’ll have to give him a basket of some sort as a thank you. Thanks for finding someone for land. That’s one thing off our shoulders.”

The day for the hunting trip came, and we were both excited. We got to meet the family sharing their land and we had dinner with them. October 18<sup>th</sup> came around, and we were prepared for the best. We said a prayer and started to look for a good spot to settle. The Hennens showed us where it is best to hunt. Alongside that, they put trail cams around a path in a tree line.

“We’ve harvested corn this week, and the turkeys have been loving it. I’ve put a couple trail cams around the hot spots, so I can show you where they will be most,” said Mr. Hennen.

“Well thanks for the land and this opportunity. I’ve been turkey hunting for years, and it’s his first time. We’ll see what we can get,” said Grandpa.

October 18<sup>th</sup>. The first day of the hunt. All covered in camo, Grandpa said, “We’ve got to be quiet, just like in deer hunting. I’ve haven’t done this for years, but I’m glad I’m doing this with you. Let’s shoot some birds.”

“Hey Grandpa, thanks for taking me hunting. It’s something that I’ve wanted to do with you for a long time. Ever since I’ve been hooked on fishing (no pun intended), I’ve always had fun doing stuff outdoors. I know that you’ve been turkey hunting for a long time now, and I wouldn’t want to do it with anyone else except the boss himself,” said Nate.

“Well thanks, Nate; I appreciate that a lot.”

We began our trip by walking to one of the suggested hotspots. We got close to a couple of turkeys, but nothing worth shooting. Approaching lunchtime, we didn't see anything else, so we ate some appetizing ham-and-cheese sandwiches and some carrots and dip. A 'wonderful' lunch. After we filled our stomachs, we got back to hunting. Like the last time, we saw a few turkeys, but nothing worth shooting.

“Well, we've got two more days. At least we know they're there,” said a hopeful Nate, who was happy to see something unlike deer season. During Nate's deer season, it's kind of like “Alright, shoot the next one you see.”

Day two. October 19<sup>th</sup>. “Well, let's hope for more gobblers,” said Grandpa. That's exactly what happened; more gobblers. We've switched spots to the second hotspot. It was 9:02 AM when we got there. 9:13 I saw something. “Grandpa, big turkey, 11 o'clock. Nice size.”

“Good eye, Nate. We'll call it closer and wait for a good shot,” said Grandpa.

We waited a good eight minutes for a good shot, and we got the best opportunity. It got right in front of us, I used the call to get its attention, and Grandpa got a clean shot right in the neck. “Still got it! All right let's get this thing in a truck and get it situated,” declares Grandpa. “Get a picture, this is a monster bird. We'll get it weighed and eventually put it on the table.”

Last day. October 20<sup>th</sup>. Time for Nate to take his shot at a bird. “Well, you got yours, now it's my turn to get one,” said a confident Nate. We stayed at the second hotspot, where Grandpa shot his turkey.

“I bet you'll find a good turkey here. When we went here yesterday, there was a bountiful number of turkeys here, and good sized as well,” said Grandpa.

We looked around for turkeys but weren't as lucky. As we sat there, we were getting cold, so we went back to the truck to warm up. "Well, nothing here, you want to go to the last hotspot; the tree line by the corn field?" said Nate.

"You know, that sounds like the best place to hunt; right next to a field, while we're hidden in the trees. That will be our best move," said Grandpa.

That's what we planned for next. We waited for it to get warmer outside while we listened to the Vikings lose on the radio. When the time was right, we drove over to the corn field and saw many turkeys. "Would you look at that? A bunch of birds looking for trouble." said Nate. "Let's see what we can set on the table."

As we waited, we called in a couple more turkeys, but they weren't big enough to shoot. Most of them were toms, but there were hens lurking around the area. "Well, you've got your turkey, it's getting late, how about we give it five more minutes, and then dip," said Nate.

"It's your day, so if that's what you want, I'm fine with that," said Grandpa. Suddenly, we saw a massive tom, two o'clock. "Take your time, and line up a good shot, straight at the neck," said Grandpa.

As I took my time, Grandpa called it to get its attention, and the shot was fired. We waited for a while, and we carried the bird to the truck. "What a great weekend! We both got our turkeys and had a wonderful time together. I'm glad I took you. Let's give Sue a call, and we'll have double the amount of turkey for Thanksgiving," said a delighted Grandpa.

Thanksgiving came around, and Grandma was just splendid to prepare two turkeys for the holiday. The family came, and they were surprised over the amount of food.

"Oh my!" declared Ann.



“Wow!” said Becky. “Maybe I shouldn’t have brought two cakes.” (At that moment, the whole room went silent.) A timer went off, and the first turkey was on the table. Mom was outside in the garage smoking the second turkey. Coincidentally, the second bird was done five minutes after the first.

Luke and Ruby were on the floor playing with toys and tractors, Grandma was having a time in the kitchen, Dave was talking to Levi about the house, Bob and Natalie were eating grapes, and Grandpa had a pen and a crossword puzzle in his recliner, the dog sleeping on his lap. Thanks for all the memories, Grandpa.

**Leila Dexheimer  
River Falls**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

**A Matter of Life and Death**

I held the bone in my hands, feeling the grooves cut at my flesh. I felt my wings tense as the wind whistled softly. The bone I was holding was a ring finger bone, parts of it chipping away.

“Oh you poor death,” I muttered to it. “How’d this happen?”

The bone whispered its answer. I smiled softly, dropping the bone to the pile beneath me. The bone shattered to tiny pieces and scattered over the bone hill. I tucked back my hair and began to open my wings. They groaned as they slowly unfurled.

“I’m coming, dear death,” I whispered to the shadows.

My wings opened behind me. With a final thrust I shot into the sky. It slid under me, pulling me further into the sky. I breathed in the stinging air. Soon the Ocean came into view. *The Ocean*. The first step in the afterlife. I glided over the spraying Ocean. Salty spray jumped past me, lashing at my skin. I lifted myself upward as a wave came crashing my way. I hissed at the Ocean in discontent. It heard my call and settled to a calm thrum. In the distance, I saw the outline of someone thrashing in the water. I angled my body down and scooped the thrashing person up. The soul pulled frantically at my grip.

“Let go of me, bird!”

I snarled at their disrespect. Humans these days. They continued to scratch at me, turning in my hands. I heard the Ocean chuckle beneath me as if saying, *good luck with that one*. I dove down to the shore, dropping the human in the sand. They rolled, sputtering up sand and dirt. My feet gracefully brushed against the gritty sand. The soul gasped in the air, crawling away. I caught a glimpse of their hand and the shattered ring finger.

The human stopped crawling, finally slumping against the sand in a heap of defeat. Sand was plastered on his face, but I saw the young man beneath the dirt. He had cautious eyes and golden-brown hair. The simple green shirt and black pants, plastered to his skin in a wet mess. He breathed slowly, watching me.

“What are you?” he asked.

I stretched out my wings. He watched as they moved, stuck in a trance of awe.

“What do you think I am?” I spoke to him in English, but my accent remained.

He hesitated, looking toward the Ocean. Maybe he thought he could escape, get back to his previous life. He turned back to me.

“The Devil,” he whispered.

I shrugged, “Close enough.”

Fear flashed in his cold eyes – his dead eyes. I smirked. I had seen that look many times before. I missed the Vikings who swam through the Ocean and bowed at my feet. I was a god to them, and now I’m simply a monster.

I stepped toward the soul. He tried to scramble away, but a dark shadow held him down. The shadow clamped the soul’s hands together, preparing him for me. The man screamed and thrashed on the beach. I walked toward him, my wings grazing the ground. My fingers twitched as I reached out and touched his chest, right where his heart once

was. The soul's eyes grew wide as light surrounded us. I felt the shadows retreat as Life came to the shore. I was waiting for the usual man to step out of the blinding light, his tail snapping behind him. Instead, a girl stepped out. I stepped back from her. She had gorgeous blonde hair and eyes as blue as the sky. Light freckles powdered her heart shaped face about her tan skin. She looked over her shoulder at me, her glacier eyes taking me in.

"Where's Ndu?" I asked lazily.

The woman turned to me, revealing claws along her nails. They were clear and deadly, like a weapon. I smiled at the thought of what bones those weapons could break.

"Ndu has sent me in his place." She bowed.

I relished in her obedience, allowing it to seep into my arrogance. She stood up. Her eyes trailed across the Ocean. Life wore a white dress with a corset set with pearls. Lace covered her arms like billowing wings.

"That's it?" she asked, her voice full of awe.

I shrugged. The darkness crept past the new Life. She jumped to the side allowing it to come to me. Life stared at it as it slithered across me.

"You do know how to do this, right?"

Life blinked, as if just realizing she had a job. I stepped back, a smile dancing on my lips. There had never been a replacement before and I was excited to see how she would handle it. Life turned to the soul, who was still held back by my remaining shadows.

"Hello," she said in perfect English. "My name is Jakawi and I'm here to figure out where you belong."

The man looked between me and her, his eyes wide with terror. I gave him a sympathetic glance. He turned back to Life, his lip twitching.

"I belong at home!" he screamed whilst pulling at the shadows.

“Oh, oh,” Jakawi sat down, her brow furrowed.  
 “You’re dead, there is no way back.”

The man stopped for a moment. I felt a laugh rise in my throat, ready for her to see her mistake. The soul screamed. His scream echoed across the Ocean. I heard the disgruntled groans of the creatures beneath the water. Life jumped up, lunging at him. I laughed as she tackled him. I couldn’t breathe between laughs. My wings heaved with every breath. Jakawi put her hand over his mouth.

“Quit laughing and help me!”

I brushed away a tear, a chuckle still breaking through.

“No, this is *your* job, not mine.”

She snarled. The man rolled in the sand beside her. I winked at her and the shadows stopped him.

“Here’s how this will go,” I hissed at him. “You are dead. It’s just that. There is no way back unless we say so. Life and I are going to choose if you’re reborn and put back on Earth as a new soul, or if you will join me and my ocean of monsters.”

I motioned behind me to the snapping water. I felt the monsters beneath swimming around, hungry for a new arrival. The man looked behind me, his brow furrowed. I raised my hand and a scaly tail emerged from the water, just enough to scare him. He paled and stared at Life, who stared at me.

“Which one would you like?”

He nodded toward Jakawi, too scared to speak.

“Good choice,” I seethed.

The man flinched as I opened my wings. Before I could shoot into the sky, Life put a hand on my shoulder.

“Thank you,” she said in an insufferably soft voice.

I snarled. “Rule number one of this partnership, don’t *ever* touch me.”

I pulled away, letting the shadows run across her hand. She yelped and pulled away. My wings curled again, but then I heard her sigh behind me.

“Well this is embarrassing, but I-I thought you’d help me choose.”

I was going to scream.

“Please, I don’t want to choose wrong and get fired or something. Can I even get fired?”

I turned around. “Yes, yes you can.”

I knew that Death before me was fired. He was now on Earth, living a human life. I would see him every several decades, whenever he died. Life lowered her head in defeat. I hated that look. It was weak.

“If you don’t want to get fired,” I leaned close, “Get out of my realm.”

Jakawi’s eyes flickered with distaste before she turned away. I watched as she left, taking the soul with her. She flicked her hands, the claws slashing through the air. A spark of pure light danced in the space before them. Life looked back at me before stepping into the portal of swirling light. Her figure disappeared into the whirlwind of the portal, leaving nothing behind. I stood there for a moment, listening to the crashing waves and whistling wind.

The darkness realm was exactly as it sounded. Black clouds lingered in the dark blue sky, as if it was always night. The deafening crash of the Ocean’s waves lapped against the sandy shore. In the center of the Ocean stood a towering hill made of white bone with my throne atop it. It was shiny in the dim light and perfectly smooth. White bone carved in spirals around the armrests created the illusion of darkness trapped inside.

As I sat atop my throne, carefully stroking the water, it suddenly splashed at me. I hissed, and the Ocean hissed back. My eyes widened. Someone was on the shore.

I launched from my spot, dipping into the dark clouds. The Ocean laughed as I dove toward the small island. I saw a light flicker on the left and angled my wings to glide that way.

I landed roughly on the sand, my feet dipping into the grainy elixir. A portal gleamed in the air. It was Jakawi's portal. The light swarmed and echoed, consuming the darkness. I growled and turned around. My wings shot forward, landing on Life's throat. That was when I felt claws against mine. Life stared down at her claws, gripping my vocal cords.

"You know that won't kill me."

Jakawi looked up, a flash of hunger glazing her eyes.

"What?"

I chuckled under my breath and removed her claws from my throat.

"Only the bone of a soul can kill a Mortality." She looked down at the sand. "Why are you here?"

"You remember that soul? Well, I lost him. Oh, don't look at me like that! I didn't mean to."

"How do you lose a soul in your own realm?" I screamed.

She flinched. "I don't need a lecture, I just need help."

"No! It's my job to retrieve them then hand them off to you!"

"Please," she whimpered in that insufferably sweet voice.

I groaned. How could she be so irresponsible? A soul was wandering around in a Mortality's realm. The universe

wouldn't just fire her, they would – I couldn't think about that. Not now. I breathed slowly.

“Okay, but you're gonna owe me for millennia.”

“Of course!”

She jogged at the portal which was still quivering in the air. I breathed slowly, looking out at my realm. The Ocean cackled in my ear. I bared my teeth and stepped into the circle of light.

It was oddly warm in the portal. Light surrounded me everywhere, but it wasn't blinding, more like a soothing thrum that felt all too familiar. My feet touched solid ground. The air smelt like lemon. I now knew why Ndū always smelt like cleaning wipes.

The realm of light was a giant desert with glittering white sand. A temple stood a few yards away. The temple of Sort. It was made of a white marble and stood tall in the blue sky. Hedges shaped of old Mortalities lined the path. The left for Life, the right for Death. Giant stairs lead to the open room where two portals stood. There was no wind in the realm of light. In fact, there wasn't anything. It was just a sea of white sand. How did she lose a soul in this landscape?

I clapped my hands together. “All right, let's get started.”

I glided over the rolling hills, scanning the bare land. Jakawi stood next to the temple in all her glory. I imagined how out of place I looked in the realm of light, like how Life looked in mine.

I shot toward the ground before Life. She took a step back, her arms crossed.

“You didn't find him,” she squeaked.



I panted softly, “I don’t know what you did to scare him off, but I can’t see him.”

Jakwai lowered her head and her shoulders started to shake. It took me a moment to realize she was crying. I took a step back as if it was contagious.

“Now, now. Let’s um, walk around and see if we spot him.”

Jakawi sniffled. “Okay, thank you...” She looked at me. “What *is* your name? I can’t keep calling you Death.”

“Oh really? I prefer that.” I sighed. “My name is Morte.”

“Morte,” Jakawi repeated as if it was the only thing she knew.

I chuckled and began walking. Jakwai ran after me.

“So, tell me about the job.”

“What?”

“All I know is that the universe chose me from a wave of souls. It took my name and gave me Jakawi. I’m supposed to be one of the two Mortalities, and I can easily get fired from that job.”

“Yes, but that’s not all. You remember me saying we can die from the bone of a soul? Well, it’s not ‘dying’ per se. Being fired is dying. The bone kills our soul so there is nothing but eternal blackness. Then the universe chooses a replacement. We are Mortalities. As you know, it’s our job to sort through the souls to either have them reborn or join the realms.”

“Wow. A few weeks ago I was just a girl from Boston about to go to college.”

“How did you die?” I asked.

Jakawi frowned. She looked to the sky, tears coming to her eyes.

I groaned. I hated it when people cried.

“I got sick,” I whispered. Jakawi looked at me.  
 “1784, my parents dead, my brothers too young to take care of me, and me, too sick to take care of them. I did all I could, but I —”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine.” I turned away from her.

We were quiet for a while. Jakawi suddenly grabbed my arm.

“There!” She pointed at a rolling dune.

A speck of color ran through the white side. I shot into the sky and flew at the figure. The man screamed as I tackled him. It was an ugly sound that filled my senses. The soul fought in my grip, screaming and writhing.

He screamed, “But you let me go! You said I could run!”

I snarled and dragged the man to his feet. He was drooling and crying at that point. I could barely understand what he was saying. Jakawi ran up, panting softly. The soul lunged at her. She jumped out of the way just in time for me to catch him.

“Stop fighting,” I hissed in his ear.

He shivered and went limp in my arms. Before I could question it, Jakawi used a flash of light to lift him into the air.

“Let’s send this soul home,” she said in a calm voice.

The light flashed and we were suddenly back at the temple. I gasped and leaned against a pillar, my insides rolling.

“I could have just flown.” I said.

“No, no, this is faster.”

Jakawi suddenly grabbed the man, holding him before the flickering white portal.

“Wait!” I said. “Isn’t this supposed to be a slow, calculated decision?”

“Not every soul can join your sea of death.”

“No, that’s... this just feels wrong.” I stood up, a wave of nausea overcoming me. “You seem like you’re rushing.”

Jakawi’s eyes shone with worry, then hatred. I took a deep breath, trying to make my gaze the least intimidating as possible.

“Trust me, I’m being very calculated.”

With that, she shoved the man into the portal. I gasped as his screams disappeared into the ball of light. Suddenly, I felt something in the air move, something cruel. It contorted around my heart like a snake squeezing. Something was wrong.

I spun around, barely missing the bone that came swinging past my head. Life let out an animalistic screech and dove at me. I contorted my body to the left. She crashed against the black throne. I lifted my wings to cover my face, quickly feeling the claws of a Mortality digging into my feathers. I screamed from the pain of the sharp talons ripping through my skin, my blood, and my bones. My knees buckled and nausea washed over me. I held up my hands and used them to shove my wings forward. Jakawi fell backward, catching herself with her claws. Suddenly, a light surrounded the temple. She chuckled. The sound sent shivers up my spine.

“I’m going to be the only Mortality!” She screamed, a ravenous look in her eyes.

“I will be replaced.” I said in a steely voice.

“Then I will take care of them. I’ll take care of them all!”

Jakaiwi, Life, my friend, intended to not just kill me, but wipe me from existence. I could stop, I could let her win,

but then what would I be but a coward? And I am no coward.

I lunged first, landing a smack across her jaw. She twirled through my punches like a trick of the light. Finally, Jakawi used the light to pin me to a pillar. She limped forward, blood coating her once perfect face. I spat at her. Jakawi lifted the bone and brought it down in one swift motion. The first real pain I had felt in decades. The first taste of real death. And it came from Life.

I groaned and looked down at the hilt of a bone sticking from my chest. My wings suddenly became too heavy and the ground was spinning. I fell to my knees before Life. She looked down at me with crazed eyes. The ground came to meet me as I leaned against the cold marble. I saw Life kneel beside, felt as she stroked my arm, heard as she began to cry. Then, like the stories told, darkness.

**Leila Dexheimer  
River Falls**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

**The Train Ride**

The dirt was so thick. It stuck to my skin like a coat I could not shed. My lungs felt like they were on fire every time I breathed. In the distance, I heard sirens. *They're coming to save me.* I thought. My throat itched to scream, cry, ask for help, but they were too far away. Better to save my energy, right?

I took a moment to look around, though there wasn't much to see. Actually, I couldn't see anything. I could feel with my free hand; that was my sight. I knew there was a block of concrete right on top of me trapping me there. Then, there was the pile of rubble beside my hand. That was it – that was what I was confined to. No light, no comforting voices, no warmth. I shivered and I tried to lift myself up, but my leg was stuck. Rubble shifted around me. I stretched out with my hand to feel what had caught my leg. Bile rose in my throat as I felt what could only be a large boulder of concrete trapping my leg. I hadn't felt it before, but now I felt its weight compressing my leg. It felt like I was being crushed inch by inch until there would be nothing. When I pulled my hand away I felt something warm drip down my fingers. I let out a small cry. My face was already wet with tears, but these felt different. I wasn't crying for myself; I was crying for the people worrying right now. I thought of my sister. She was probably looking for me, or maybe she hadn't heard. She could be waiting at the subway right now. I closed my eyes trying to think of her and not my trapped

leg. I thought of her beautiful auburn hair and her too perfect smile. Of course, she had to get those genes.

The tears continued coming. My mouth grew dry and I continued to shiver against the cold. You'd think it'd be warm, but no. It felt colder than a usual New York September morning. The sirens seemed to be getting closer, but as I opened my mouth to scream nothing came out. I could only whimper. I sucked in the thick air, trying again. Nothing. My eyes burned with tears and my heart pounded.

My sister was waiting, she was waiting, I had to catch my train. My sister and her perfect smile, she was waiting. If I could laugh, I would, just because of the fact that I was worrying about catching a train. But catching that train would mean I wasn't here, trapped. Outside I heard bangs and shouting. Again I tried to scream. The words were right there, I could feel them. *Help.*

The banging continued, though I didn't know what it was. All I knew was that it was shifting the rubble. I needed to get out before I was crushed. My chest continued to pound and my breath got faster. I heard a final bang and a new wave of rubble came crumbling down. Even though I couldn't see I closed my eyes, knowing it was coming. A scream bubbled in my throat as I felt something fall on my free arm. The concrete block on my chest sank deeper. Now breathing sent a wave of pain coursing through my entire body. *I needed to catch my train.* Tepid blood coated my arms. It was slick, and felt warmer than it should. My hand was paralyzed beneath the dirt. My mouth opened with more silent screams. I tried to maneuver with my free leg. I didn't care if it caused me to be crushed, I just needed to get out. It was my only hope. I kicked at the floor in a futile attempt to move my body; to move the concrete block across my chest. I felt it move, little by little. With every kick, the pain deepened. My ribs cracked and my lungs screamed in pain. I

heard my spine pop and break. The pain became a cloud of darkness hovering over me. Exhaustion tugged at my eyes, begging me to rest, but I knew if I did I would miss the train. I swear death was standing in front of me, waiting for the moment the concrete crushed my lungs, waiting for every bone in my body to shatter, waiting for the moment my heart would stop beating. I was waiting for the same thing, yet I continued to kick, over and over, an excruciating process that seemed to have no end. My leg shook, my teeth chattered. I wanted to stop, just a wink of sleep. The pounding in my chest slowed and my breathing turned sluggish. The shouting continued above. *They're here to save me.* This time I didn't try to scream. With my last ounce of energy, I kicked one last time. I felt death lurch, ready to claim me, but the concrete fell aside. A new wave of rubble rained down, but it slid off my face. I gasped and coughed. Air returned to my lungs and death slinked away. I sat up and began a coughing fit. Once I could breathe again I looked up to see a tiny sliver of light had made its way through the darkness. I turned my face toward the light, allowing it to bathe me. I let out a small laugh that sounded more like a whimper. After I was done basking, I looked around. I found I was in a small cavern of rubble, just wide enough for me to fit inside. I lifted my one hand out of the debris, wincing as the dirt and concrete cut at my hand. My other hand was still trapped, as was my leg, but I was able to move. I used the light to examine my leg. A metal barb had punctured my thigh and was sticking from it. Blood gushed from the wound. With shaking hands I touched below the wound. I hissed with pain but pressed the heel of my hand deeper in. Blood continued to squirt between my fingers. There was no stopping it. I went stiff with realization. I had to make that train. I had to see my sister, I had to mock her fashion style. I *needed* to get to the subway.

Glass was all around me so I took hold of a piece. I barely noticed the pain as it sliced into my palm. My shirt was a beautiful purple blouse with lace. Funny enough, my sister had bought it for me for Christmas two years ago. She would be angry at me for destroying it.

I brought the glass shard to the fabric and cut. Soon I had a rope made and wrapped it around my leg. My eighth-grade health class came rushing back. Tie it tight, tighter than you think it should. Put it a reasonable distance away from the wound. I tied the knot, pulling with my teeth. Afterward, I just sat back, regaining my breath. The tiredness returned, lulling me into sleep. I felt my heart grow weak again and my head pound. My eyes grew heavy.

Above I heard more sirens and the bark of dogs. People shouted and yelled. They sounded so close, yet so far away. My bottom lip quivered as I reached out my hand, a scream stuck in my throat. I gasped, but my lungs didn't fill. I needed to make that train. I couldn't let my sister wait there forever.

Death's hand grabbed my shoulder. I wanted to let it in, but I couldn't, not yet. I slammed my fist into the rubble wall. I heard someone shout. I hit it again and again. *Help me*. Spots clouded my vision and I started to slip backward. It felt like I was falling. Death wrapped its arms around me, welcoming me, but pushed me back. Someone was talking to me.

"Stay with us!" they screamed.

My eyes fluttered and I saw a man in a police uniform. His face was streaked with dirt and blood.

"You're okay. Just hold on!" he said, pressing his hand into my chest.

I relished in the sound of his voice. Light, warmth, and a comforting voice. Black dots speckled my vision as more people came. Some in red uniforms, others in blue. I



heard a mix of voices, but couldn't make out what they were saying. At some point, I slipped into a void of darkness.

I heard screaming first, then it was the sound of my heart beating. It was strange. I was dead, wasn't I? When I woke up I was sitting on a gurney in the middle of the street. The sky was a blackish color, but the air was clear. I gasped in, savoring the crisp air flooding my lungs. There were people crying on the sidewalks and others leaning over bodies. Rubble, dirt, and glass were strewn over the roads and spilled into other buildings.

"She's awake," someone said beside me.

I turned my head to see a woman with brown hair and bright eyes. She smiled at me, though her eyes were laced with grief. I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She pursed her lips and patted my arm.

"Don't talk, dear." Her eyes flicked to the IV sticking from the base of my arm. I followed her gaze and saw my hand. It was the one that had been crushed and it looked as such. Bones were sticking out and the fingers appeared to be blue, but coated in enough blood so I couldn't really tell. I turned to the side, emptying my stomach, then I saw my leg. It laid there, limp. The tourniquet was still tied around my thigh.

"You were smart to do that. If you hadn't, you surely would have died."

I turned to her, my throat aching with unspoken words.

"I –" The pain shot through my chest as I spoke. My voice was gravelly, not like my smooth, honeyed voice. "I ca-can't feel it."

The woman gulped. "You've temporarily lost function in your leg. So we've given you meds to help with the pain. Is there anyone we can call?"

I looked up at the sky. Through the smoke, I could see the empty space where the Twin Towers once stood. Suddenly I remembered my train.

“I ne-ed to make my trai-train.” I croaked whilst sitting up.

The woman pushed me back down. “No, no! You can't be worried about making a train! Do you have someone?”

“My si-ster is waiting.”

“A sister. That will do.” She gently rubbed my arm then called to a police officer. “We need a sister. Ask if someone in the crowd knows a Miss Elise Kunkin.”

My eyes fluttered at the sound of my name. He disappeared into the chaotic mass of people and, before I knew it, he was back with my sister. I recognized her immediately. The perfect teeth and long, luscious hair. Amy ran up beside me, placing a hand on my arm. Her face was wet with tears.

“You’re gonna be okay,” she whispered.

I looked into her eyes. I’d known her my whole life. We’d grown up side by side. I always knew when she was lying to me.

“No I won’t.”

“What are you talking about?” she murmured between snuffles.

“Nothing will ever be okay again.”

“So, that’s my story,” the girl whispered to the woman sitting across from her.

“That must have been very scary,” The woman remarked, brushing aside her billowing white coat. “What happened after?”

The girl laughed softly, but the humor didn't reach her eyes. "The first responders saved my life and I was brought to the hospital. Somehow I was able to survive. I shouldn't have."

The woman scribbled something on her pad of paper.

"Why do you say that?"

The girl tucked her knees under chest. "I had 12 broken ribs, a fractured spine, a broken arm, and I almost lost my leg." She shook her leg, wincing slightly.

The woman looked at the girl over her glasses. "Do you think you should've survived?"

The girl looked up, tears slipping down her face. She took the sleeve of her hospital gown and wiped away the tears.

"I think I fought, that I suffered, and that I did survive for a reason."

The woman smiled and set aside her pad.

"Is there anything else you want to tell me, Elise?"

Elise looked out the window at the bustling city. There were signs and posters on every corner, all of them for the fallen.

She bit her lip, thinking. "I never did make that train."



**Nonfiction**  
**Grades 9 & 10**



**Cristy Renteria Rojas**  
**Mountain Lake**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

**A Forever Friend**

I'm so grateful when I get to say that my relationship with my sister is very close. Perhaps it has to do with our culture. Our culture emphasizes family very much. But no matter what happens or how far you are from your loved ones, a strong bond is what keeps the relationship close.

Something I've learned is that no matter how much you grow, there's always going to be a special person in your life. For me, that special someone is my sister. Of course, there have been times when we fought, and times when we laughed, cried, sang, and helped each other out. We've learned and grown in different ways. We watch each other do accomplishments and new experiences. This is my life with a forever friend.

I love playing games with my sister. Seeing her chocolate eyes twinkle with her perfect smile always makes me feel better. We would laugh at little things and watch fun movies or videos together. We cuddle with fluffy blankets and put our heads against pillows full of colors. She was and still is strong even though she has small and cold hands. She uses them to color with me, make bracelets with me, and help me and everyone else. Abi is very joyful, though she used to be shy. With our family, she always has this contagious joy in her that makes everyone feel good.

I've always admired my sister because she has always been a great role model to me. I used to copy the

way she talked or acted because I wanted to be like her. It's just something siblings naturally do with their older siblings. One day, before I knew it, she was in middle school. We couldn't play as much as we used to, but at least we had some time to play after her homework.

As the years went by, she started looking different. At first, her dark hair went down her back. Then my sister got a haircut. We got it to the length of her elbow and the next day, she had natural curls! They're so beautiful and they feel like a fluffy cloud. Her soft hair matches her sweet personality. She then said goodbye to colorful glasses and got contacts. This made her chestnut eyes more visible.

My sister's height didn't change at all; in fact, she stopped growing in middle school. Once she was in high school, she started working and was focusing on college classes. She also started driving, and when she did it for the first time, I was terrified but extremely proud of her because she did so well. She was too. Her excitement filled the car with joy.

On Abi's first day of work, she put her hair up and put on a light blue face mask and vibrant blue scrubs. She came back telling us all the things she did with a smile on her face and full of excitement. Afterward, she did her college applications. Her dark brown eyebrows were downward as she looked at her computer screen. After many months of hard work, she got accepted to the college she wanted to go to. Our house filled up with excitement. I was so happy for her, yet I was a little scared to become an only child.

Seeing all this made me realize that time isn't going to go any slower. I had to take advantage of every second I had left with her, I had to cherish those few moments before she moved on to college. May 26, 2023, was the last day of



school. It was a bittersweet day because I knew I was going to start experiencing many ‘lasts’.

On May 27<sup>th</sup>, it was my sister’s graduation ceremony. I very clearly remember seeing everyone’s faces. They watched my sister walk across the room with tears in their eyes. People gazed at my sister with the brightest smiles and with joy. My sister’s smile was as bright as the glowing sun. The ceremony was a core memory. All the seniors were hugging their families. When my sister hugged my parents, my parents had smiles on their faces. I can only imagine how hard it could be to let go of your firstborn. Although it must’ve been difficult, it was also exciting. Their teary eyes filled up with the bittersweet feeling of letting go and pride. When she came to me, I began to cry as well. It was the slowest and most special hug I’ve ever had. In a way, it was like I was telling her a small goodbye. As they went through the slideshows from the seniors’ childhoods, I knew that time wasn’t going to go any slower. Then summer came.

I began growing close to my sister’s friends that summer also. They were always there for me and I was always there for them. We would do many things together like stargazing, carpooling, singing, Bible studying, and more. It was the best summer because not only did I get to know my sister’s friends better, I made true friendships that showed me real love and real care. They helped me grow in many ways. They taught me what a true leader should be.

Many memories were made and many lessons were learned in the summer of 2023, I made unexpected friendships and slowly started to get out of my comfort zone.

But I started to worry. What was life going to be like as an only child? Even through all the fun, I had that thought in the back of my mind.

August 18th, 2023 was the most bittersweet day of my life: my sister's moving day for college. Many tears were shed and I remember how sad I was. I always loved long walks and car rides with my sister. We'd listen to Lizzy McAlpine while watching the sunsets and having deep conversations about life. I remember listening to her sweet, velvety voice that always soothed me as we listened to the music. We'd come back home late at night some days laughing because we had the best time. I treasure those little moments in my heart. When I had to take that last ride before dropping her off, my stomach tied up. I was in the front seat of her car as we listened to her favorite music. I had all these flashbacks of my sister and me. I thought to myself, "Is it that time already?" I remember my sister's excitement, though. When we got to the campus, we met her sweet roomies, her kind professors, and the incredible environment. Little did I know what was coming up for my sister and even for me. I knew this was the end of a sweet chapter, but also the beginning of a beautiful new story.

My sister had a few college plans already, but God had other ones. We left that campus with excitement but tears, many tears. I ran off to my sister's bedroom crying. I knew life wasn't going to be the same after that day. Even though things were going to be different at home, my family and I were going to proudly watch my forever friend grow in life. We wanted to be there for her every step of the way. Even though we were going to be a little bit far from her, our relationship remained close.

As I got used to being more independent, I started learning many things like my worth, how much I can achieve, and more. It wasn't that my sister was in the way or anything. I was just so focused on being "her little sister" that I forgot to see who I truly was – even though I'm so honored to be the little one to my sister. I began growing

mentally, spiritually, and more. I knew that not every day wasn't going to be easy. But I'm thankful I have a good role model that I can look up to.

Abi's grown and still is growing so much and I'm so proud of her. I get to say "That's my sister!" as I watch her do amazing things.

My forever friend is my sister. She has always been there for me and I'm so grateful to have such a kind best friend. I can still see her pearly white smile from when she was little, and she still experiences the joy she gives every day even though now she's all grown up.

Of course, what's nice is that I can still talk to her on the phone, text, or visit. My sister began to thrive and make new, close friendships. I never doubted my best friend was going to struggle to make friends; her joy was very contagious and special. She's a light. I'm thankful that even at the end of the chapter, our relationship is still close. I appreciate our rare bond. Because no matter how far away we are from each other, she will always be my forever friend.



**POETRY**  
**Grades 11 & 12**



**Nafis Bin Nazrul**  
**Plainview**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

**Suffocation**

Life hovering over the violet flowers  
 so bright that it creates a burning sensation in the eyes,  
 Apollo extending his arms toward me  
 but the strings attached to my back won't let me move any  
 further.

The crickets are calling someone constantly.  
 Do you know whom they are longing for?  
 The Monarchs are flying to Mexico.  
 Shall they ever return?

The Maple tree is standing there alone,  
 its root buried deep inside the ground.  
 It was just 15 months old when it was planted here.  
 Doesn't it look a bit abandoned to you?

Extreme vulnerability creeping from behind the mask  
 The fine sensation of breeze invokes the fantasies hidden  
 from everyone,  
 All the bones start to crack, the skin wants to tear apart,  
 the scavengers start to feast on the heart.

Can you see the abundance of oxygen here?  
 And freshness in the breath?  
 But, what's the point of oxygen  
 when the lungs have been fossilized already.

**Addison Kosel  
Hutchinson**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

**The Hollow Tree**

Far away in the woods  
There was a Hollow Tree  
I won't forget that it brought out  
The very best in me

When I peered into its darkness  
I saw it was dry and warm  
So I snuggled up inside it  
To take shelter from the storm

Inside it I had dreams  
Of when I was young  
And didn't judge my neighbor  
With evil on my tongue

I awoke in tears  
At my horrid words  
And cowered from the judging stares  
Of the summer birds

From then on I went humbly  
And felt so light and free  
All my ways were seen and fixed  
By that Hollow Tree



**Afsheen Mohamed Abusali  
Marshall**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

**a raindrop**

the raindrop sent from the skies,  
formed from its ancestors below and held up above,  
it descends with its family.  
stories of storms,  
and tales of trees.  
yet they fall  
with only a patter  
and glint of  
goodbye.



**FICTION**  
**Grades 11 & 12**



**Addison Kosel  
Hutchinson**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

### **The Bystander's Action**

Michael slid the heavy mop over the slippery floor. Now that winter was melting, the students were tracking in all sorts of muddy messes from outside for him to clean. Michael kept his head down as the crowd swayed around him, but he could feel their stares on his back. The hallway population ebbed and flowed in between classes until noon, when the lunch bell rang. The rest of the school became as silent as the grave, chatter dissipating as the students filtered into the lunchroom.

Unfortunately, as Michael passed the cafeteria, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Mrs. Gurney, the Vice Principal of Timberside Middle School, stood there with a deep frown on her face. Michael couldn't meet her eye; she towered a full head taller than him. He hated any kind of social interaction, hence why he was a janitor. But even then, he could still become the center of attention. The false rumors of him being an ex-con or having autism took their toll.

Mrs. Gurney jerked her head towards a small puddle of marinara sauce on the floor that was visible through the cafeteria doors. That glare of hers disturbed the marrow in Michael's bones, and she knew it. He hurried through the doors with his cart of supplies, biting his tongue to hold back the comment he wanted to make about her condescending attitude.

The cacophony that filled his ears made him imagine what it would be like to march an army into a giant conch

shell. The whole place echoed with peals of laughter and loud conversations through mouths stuffed with food. The pungent chemical he sprayed the mess with stung his nose. He mopped and scrubbed vigorously.

Michael heard the voices of nearby eighth grade girls, mocking him. Most days, he was good at blocking it out and fighting down the shame and anger. However, today he could feel the frustration bubbling up into his throat from his heart, like a kettle about to boil.

Then fear came along and cooled that anger tremendously. He knew better than to expect anything more. Life was so much calmer and safer when he simply watched others go by.

Michael tried to distract himself by listening to the noisy chatter of another table. While he cleaned, he allowed the drone of their voices to block out other noise, until one of the boys started coughing. The coughing persisted, becoming deeper and rougher each time. The table grew quiet before another boy got up and slapped his hand on his friend's back. It didn't work, and the choking boy began to panic, flailing his arms wildly.

The history teacher, who was supervising lunch that day, ran over but didn't seem to have any idea what to do. Michael stood watching in shock.

In a flash, Mrs. Gurney ran into the cafeteria, practically pouncing on the boy in his seat and trying to perform the Heimlich maneuver.

Michael saw immediately that she was performing it incorrectly. The boy was sitting, and her hands were locked over his sternum instead of below the ribcage. Despite this, he felt fear root him solidly to the spot. The boy was writhing and gagging while Mrs. Gurney yelled for help and the history teacher tried to ward off the gathering crowd. It felt surreal, like a film. It wasn't until Michael saw the tears

slide down the boy's reddening face that his resolve solidified. He could not stand by.

With agility he didn't know he had, Michael weaved through the worried students and nearly knocked Mrs. Gurney off her feet. He yanked the boy violently from his seat so he could lean him forward, and interlocked his fingers over the boy's stomach. Then he thrust his hands down towards himself. The boy choked and shuddered as Michael supported his weight. He thrust several more items – to no avail.

Horror filled him as the boy quieted and went limp. Michael was breathing heavily, the world muted by his pounding heart, the student beginning to grow lifeless in his arms. He gave one final thrust. The boy doubled over as food and saliva flew from his mouth, splattering on the floor.

Michael took the first adequate breath he had in several minutes after releasing the boy, who was now in the arms of the history teacher, trembling. He tasted coppery blood, realizing he'd at some point clenched his teeth over his tongue. Instead of comforting their classmate, the entire student body was staring at Michael – some with expressions of confusion, some gratitude, and some shock. Maybe it was the adrenaline, but he looked every single student in the eye as he rotated slowly.

Then he turned to Mrs. Gurney, who, surprisingly, held a look of downright disgust on her lined face. Five minutes before, Michael would have shriveled like a burning leaf. But now, he simply gave her a stern look, returned to his cart, and wheeled it from the cafeteria, away.

**Addison Kosel  
Hutchinson**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

**Overgrown Weeds**

She looked down on the face of the planet in shock, years of memories flooding back into her mind. Until this moment, all that time she'd spent on Psalm 22 felt as if it had happened to someone else. She operated the shuttle smoothly through the dense atmosphere, just like her training, allowing it to glide through the vast, white sky full of blue and green clouds over an endless gray ocean.

Something probed deeper into her mind, and her confidence evaporated, replaced with anxiety. It had been nearly thirty-five years since she left. How different would she look to him with her new wrinkles and gray-streaked hair? She removed the small pocket comm from her jacket and stared at it, worn with cracks from where it had been broken a few years after her return to Earth. It was fixed, but the data originally saved was gone. She hadn't been able to contact him since. That didn't matter now. The shuttle was descending.

It touched down on a landing pad of crumbling stone, which hung over the lip of a cliff that overlooked the sea. She waited anxiously for the automated tests to run and alert her that the atmosphere was safe to breathe. When they finally did, she stepped out of the shuttle and gasped as the salty air riddled with the scent of dead fish filled her nostrils. The buildings around her were old and crumbling, but bare.



"All right, Dex," she said to herself, taking a deep breath and fastening her backpack straps tighter. "Let's find him." And she made off towards the old Iron Pub that she prayed was still there.

It took her two hours to traverse over the debris of abandoned cars and destroyed structures that littered the streets. The Iron Pub's sign was still there, but the building had collapsed in on itself, by the looks of it, years before. She cursed under her breath and began to mutter about the city's layout, which she had once known like the back of her hand. There was a shift in the rubble behind her.

Dex whipped around, sliding the pistol from its holster at her waist, quietly removing the safety. Her dark hazel eyes scanned the gray environment slowly, resting on each rock, each rusting car, and each piece of trash strewn across the cracked asphalt that used to be a busy highway. She turned her head, conscious of which way the wind was blowing. Hopefully whatever moved hadn't picked up her scent.

Suddenly, there was a click and bang. Tight rubber cords struck the back of her legs, wrapping several times around her shins in less than a second and sending her toppling to the ground. Footsteps approached rapidly. She tucked in her elbows and rolled to the right, trying to back herself against a car and position her gun between her and the attacker. But before she could, the weapon was kicked out of her grasp and a large, black boot came down firmly on her arm. She looked up and froze.

There he was. He had a beard, wrinkles, and his red hair had faded to gray, along with his eyes, but it was definitely him. Nothing about him looked particularly odd, which made it even harder for her to remember that he wasn't human. A net gun, still smoking, hung at his side.

“You’re out of practice,” he muttered in a voice that sounded much deeper than when she last heard him speak.

“Corttius,” she said breathlessly. He didn’t move. Just stared at her with a grim expression, breathing slow and evenly. She reached down and unwound the wires from her legs, standing up shakily. He was as still as a statue, as if watching to see what she’d do next.

“Oh, Corttius,” she said and leaned forward, embracing him. He was as limp as a ragdoll in her arms. “Hey,” said Dex, withdrawing from the hug and looking him in the face, still unchanged. “Are you alright?” He sighed and dropped the empty net gun to the ground.

“What are you doing here, Dex?” She took a step back.

“What do you mean what am I doing here? I’ve got it. The serum. It’s here in my pack, we can still use it.” He placed a calloused hand on her shoulder, holding her still.

“You’ve . . . aged,” he said. She slapped his hand away.

“How about you look in a mirror, grandpa. I’m not the only one who’s gone gray.” A shadow of a smile crossed his face, then disappeared.

“Come with me,” Corttius said.

“Where?” He was walking away briskly before she finished the word. As she caught up, Dex noticed a rather pronounced limp in his stride.

“It’s a long walk to the old Interplanetary Affairs Headquarters if you can remember, especially with the state that the city’s in. Just keep up and keep a sharp eye, I’ll lead the way.”

“Hold on there Sergeant line leader,” Dex chimed, matching his pace. “It’s just . . . been such a long time. How are you? How far have the weeds spread? Where did everyone go?”

“You have no right to be asking questions,” he growled. A bitterness Dex had never heard before crept into his tone. Her face flushed red hot with shame.

“The comm was broken,” she said sheepishly. “I wasn’t able to contact you. All other ways of communication to Psalm 22 were cut off, apart from the signal your tracker fed to our satellites. That’s how we knew you were still alive and still here.” She watched his jaw work slowly, tensing the muscles in his neck.

“What held you?” he asked in an icy tone. Silence fell between the two of them.

“When I got back,” she began slowly. “They took my research to be analyzed. I was interviewed, more like interrogated, for a hundred different things. They told me that building another rocket wouldn’t be worth the return on investment to them. I spent at least eight years putting together a campaign so they’d succumb to social pressure and give me a chance to come back. I’m sorry it’s been so long, I really am.” It was like he hadn’t heard her.

“What about the other thirty-some years? After they agreed to let you come back? What kept you?” She bit her lip and let the sound of their footsteps fill the air.

“It was my doing,” she admitted. “I delayed it. I wasn’t ready for – ”

“What?” he snapped, turning on her. She didn’t answer. For a moment she thought an argument would ensue, but he backed down and waved her off. They spent the rest of the day hiking through the ruins in silence.

Dex gasped when they passed the Great Dome. Everything, as far as the eye could see, was covered in sickly green weeds, like an octopus’s tentacles curling around a fish. The smell hit her like a truck. The rotting flesh of animals, sour smoke from the swamp fires, and the weed’s foul stench.

“Brace yourself,” Cottius said, fishing some rusty rifles out of a building’s cellar doors. They were thin, blue and had a long hose attached to the backs. He tossed her one, which she caught, and began to untangle the hose, which was surprisingly light and flexible.

“Serum,” he barked. She removed her bag and carefully handed him the chemical in a small vial. “Keep watch,” he said before going into the cellar to add it to what was left of the city’s water supply.

When he returned, they went forward into the heart of the city, guns cocked and ready, careful not to step on any of the weed’s long stinky vines, which became nearly impossible. If they were touched, they’d turn hostile. Skeletons were strewn around the streets and squeezed between the weed’s great roots. Finally, they reached the headquarters, completely covered in green. It was where the infection had begun forty years before. It was why Dex and Corttius were needed, why they had met, why they had fallen in love, and why Dex had to get back to Earth and retrieve the only serum that could fully eradicate the weeds from the planet.

“Corttius, I need to tell you something-”

“Just keep a sharp eye,” he said, crouching lower to the ground.

“I met someone!” Dex blurted before they would make it too far to have meaningful conversation. Corttius stopped moving. He turned around with a hollow expression on his face.

“So that’s why,” he said, more to himself than to her.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “I was there for so long and didn’t know if I was coming back. It wasn’t meant to be serious at first, but then . . . then I got pregnant.” He said nothing. “We’ve got three kids, Julius and I. But that doesn’t matter now, we have to kill these weeds.” Corttius turned

back around, his limbs and head sagging slightly, as if he was overcome by exhaustion. “Don’t suppose you’ve... met anyone?” she asked cautiously.

“Of course I haven’t!” he roared, whipping around towards her, the gun trembling in his hands. “I’ve been wasting away on this God-forsaken planet while invasive plants slowly strangled the life out of it, waiting for the single most wonderful person I’d ever met to return and help me save what was left!” His voice broke as he said it, tears glistening like mirrors in his gray eyes. Dex froze, heart pounding.

“I– ” she began, her voice heavy with sorrow. Then her gaze snapped downward at a sudden movement. “Look out!” she cried, aiming her gun and firing. A jet of pale blue mist streamed from the barrel at the swamp green vine that had been rapidly snaking up alongside Corttius’ boot. It writhed and shriveled into a leathery, black rope, finally stilling, but it was too late. The hive mind was awake. The city came alive with the appearance of a million snakes clinging to every surface.

“Hurry! We have to make it to the center!” Dex screamed over the noise of the weeds moving. The two dove into the greenery, not letting their feet touch the ground for more than a second. They raced, stumbling and hopping over the angry plants, which reached for their feet and arms. One snagged Dex’s ankle, yanking her legs out from underneath her. She grunted and collapsed, more reptilian vines worming over her back. There was the hissing sound of the serum riddled mist and the dry rustling of the dying weed. She felt their grip loosen then the firm squeeze of Corttius’ hand grabbing her and hoisting her to her feet. She resecured her gun and the two dashed forward into the large dark building with shattered glass doors.

Inside the weeds were less thick and in fewer places, but they still strained against where they anchored themselves to the walls and desks to reach the people before them.

“Starkweed,” Dex growled, cocking her gun – a carnivorous, strong, and highly adaptive plant found half a galaxy away. Invasive and quick to multiply, it took over much of Psalm 22, developing a taste for its native species along with humans, causing mass evacuations and atomic bombings of populous cities in order to get rid of it. But it always survived. Until now. Humans had figured out what killed it. A high concentration of salt among other chemicals in a mist for maximum coverage was the only way of beating it. And it appeared that Dex and Corttius were the only soldiers left to do just that.

“What if they break the connection?” Dex asked, referring to the hoses on their guns that drew the diluted serum to their location.

“It’s not that smart,” Corttius assured her. “They’re powerful and coordinated. But it’s still a plant. It doesn’t have the mental capacity to sabotage us. It only understands one thing. ‘Get the tasty food.’ C’mon, this way.” He led them through several doors and down at least ten flights of stairs, the light slowly fading. Dex took a flashlight from her backpack and switched it on, guiding the white circle it cast down in front of them. That’s when they made it to the final level. Down, in a bent metal floor were several large stalks of green as thick as tree trunks. It was where the weed had settled in the city, somewhere dark and damp, next to the warm generator.

It pulsed slightly as all of its many tendrils above ground wriggled and fought to find their next meal. The moment was finally here, and it was almost too surreal to continue. Dex’s heart went wild, tremors wracking her body

and sweat sliding down her temple. Corttius's chest rose and fell rapidly as he took in the behemoth of a root the monster plant was controlled by. The sight burned a painful wound in Dex's heart.

She could see it. The crumbling of great structures, ancient and modern; the plant feasting on humans and aliens alike; the plant's poison seeping into the groundwater like a disease, tainting the wildlife's bloodstream and the great towering beasts; blocking golden sun rays from reaching any other vegetation. The disgusting parasite claiming such a beautiful sphere for itself, when it could have been stopped. Maybe she had been born and raised on Earth, but as a young woman, she had sworn to protect Psalm 22, along with its resources and people. She had called this place home, defending it, caring for it, taking refuge on it. And this awful weed was taking it from her when she was so sure that he could preserve its hope for salvation.

Then, like a churning storm, anger rose in Dex's stomach. "You said you could handle it."

"What?" Corttius asked.

"When I left. I asked you how much you could contain the weed without me and for how long. You said fifty years. You had enough chemicals and a small army to help you fight it back. You promised me that it wouldn't escape the central district. Not if it took us decades to perfect the serum!" Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the weapon further. Corttius's face grew red and his jaw clenched.

"I fought every day since you left. It's not my fault that the crew began to fall apart with a sudden decrease in leadership and increase in the weed's aggression. Be disappointed if you want. I contained what I could."

"You call this contained!" she demanded, gesturing around herself. "This is practically a playground for it! Why

should my leaving completely disarm the containment effort!”

“Because you were our leader!” Corttius exclaimed. “You gave us direction and motivation! I tried to keep that going, but morale was low and the enemy was strong. Every night, no matter how many were on watch, someone would be taken or injured beyond recovery. I watched those brave men and women get picked off one by one by this monster. But no matter how bad things got, I never gave up, because I believed you’d be speeding back as soon as you could secure our secret weapon. That hope even got me through being the last man standing, which hardly matters now. Let’s just kill this thing, it’s a bit... overgrown.”

Dex couldn’t shake the red from her vision. It was building up too fast. She was angry that Psalm 22 was dying, frustrated that Corttius hadn’t kept his promise, missing her husband and children, and scared that she wasn’t coming back to them.

“It’s more than overgrown,” she insisted. “You’ve let this thing destroy your planet.”

“Just fire!” he shouted and pulled the trigger. She joined him, dousing the large root in the serum mist, running around it in circles, watching with satisfaction as it began to shrivel and die. The thick outer skin crumbled away from the soft inner layer, which was promptly soaked. Deeper and deeper they went, watching each layer blacken and peel away from the next. But then they reached the pale, stiff center where the many stalks converged into one. The mist clung to its service but made no change to the skin. Unlike the surrounding plant flesh it simply remained still and wet, but just as pale and alive as ever.

“Oh no,” she heard Corttius mutter. Dex cursed each time she sprayed with no effect, getting louder and louder each time.



She screamed in frustration, her voice echoing through the large basement chamber and ringing in her ears. Dex backed up from their work, shaking, sweating and on the verge of tears, turning helplessly to her partner.

“How much did you use those chemicals near the headquarters?” she demanded.

“Nearly every day – when I still had the numbers.”

“How long would that have been?”

He paused and considered her question, the worry lines on his brow growing deeper.

“Must’ve been at least ten years of consistent spraying before the weed stopped responding.”

“You fool!” Dex yelled, thrusting her gun into the metal floor. She wiped her face and groaned. “The serum only works with all of its ingredients cooperating. You sprayed the first guard weedkiller so often that the Starkweed is now immune to some of those chemicals! Why didn’t you consider the overuse? Why didn’t you keep a tighter control over the soldiers?” She pulled on her graying hair, resisting the urge to pry it from her scalp.

“I thought you would’ve been back by then!” Corttius responded defensively. “And it was hard being the only one in charge of hundreds of fighters that were desperate, scared, and unmotivated. Which is why I told you that you were more use to the cause here, not on Earth!”

“Don’t turn this on me!” Dex screamed. “I was still supporting you from Earth. I fought all sorts of political, financial, and ethical battles back home in hope that Psalm 22 could be saved. I trusted that you could defend it until backup came, however long that would be! I fought harder than ever from afar and came back to this colossal failure!”

She flinched at the deafening clank Corttius’s gun made as he slammed it into the ground at his feet. She looked up, still livid, heart pounding, meeting his steady and

heartbroken gaze. Then the iron knot of anger in her chest began to loosen, and the fire in her chest was extinguished, leaving nothing but the smoke of shame rising into her throat despite her efforts to swallow it down.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered into the dark silence, her voice breaking. “Forgive me.”

Those were the last words uttered between them. The dormant, green, tendrilled creature above swarmed with deadly speed and aggression, seizing the two by their arms and legs, curling around their chests and constricting. Dex screamed and reached for her pocket comm, pressing the emergency contact button on the side, making the screen light up. Her coordinates were immediately sent out into space, but it would be several minutes before they reached Earth. Corttius struggled, straining against the wave of Starkweed that engulfed him and dragged his heavy form closer to its heart.

The air rushed from Dex’s lungs and tears filled her eyes. She glimpsed the comm’s screen once before consciousness left her. The plant’s movement crushed the device, breaking a second time. It would never be repaired. The two were gone.

**Addison Kosel  
Hutchinson**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

### **Return of the Coward**

Onark tucked and rolled into the dirt when he heard the archers draw their arrows. The smoke stung his eyes and throat as he army crawled in the brush towards the Dahlian trenches. Crude wooden barricades wrapped in barbed wire stood like a mighty wall. He placed a hand on a small patch of smooth stone, feeling around until he uncovered the metal latch under matted leaves. He tugged it upward, lifting a hatch and revealing a damp tunnel of dirt. In less than three seconds he pulled himself inside head first, letting the trap door shut behind him. As he traversed the cramped passage on his hands and knees, he noticed that it felt smaller than before. He had gotten bigger.

As expected, when he emerged to the other side of the makeshift barricade, ten tautly drawn arrows were inches from his face, and a chorus of angry shouts rang out over his head. He sat up onto his knees, holding up his hands above his head in a gesture of surrender as the noise slowly came to a stop.

“At ease,” someone barked. Onark looked up, expecting to see General Brimig, but was instead greeted by a familiar face.

Standing before him was a thin, young man with light brown hair and blue eyes. He had the same frame and build as when Onark had last seen him, but stubble now dotted his face and his shoulders were more defined. A smile played at the man’s lips, like he was amused by Onark’s silence.

“Look a bit different, don’t I?” he said. Onark only nodded, the bows taking their places at the sides of the men that held them. “So do you,” the man decided, looking him up and down in all of his bruised and mud stained glory. He snapped his fingers. Onark was seized by two men and hauled to his feet.

“Elitch,” Onark began. “I can’t believe how much has changed. How’s the war been to you?”

“Save it,” the young man snapped, his geniality evaporating. “Just tell me what you’d like to know.” Onark nodded, cracking a sly grin. He was put off when the smile was not reflected.

“Where’s General Brimig?” he asked, following Elitch as he walked away.

“Dead,” Elitch said simply as they made their way through a series of cramped and filthy trenches, splitting a sea of weathered and worn out soldiers.

“How?” Onark asked.

“Stray arrow. Straight through the heart, lucky fellow. A lot quicker than how most of these men go.” He gestured to either side, where grimy men with burn scars to missing eyes could be observed cleaning their weapons and wringing out their damp clothes.

“Who’s in charge then?” They came out onto level ground, a sea of gray tents spread out before them. Hundreds of men, young and old, moved sluggishly through it.

“Why do you want to know?” Elitch asked. Onark chuckled and casually placed a hand on his companion’s shoulder – which was promptly shaken off.

“You’ve always tried to be as clever as me. Come now, who is it and when I speak to them. I must state my business, what skills I offer, and pledge my undying loyalty.” Elitch stopped dead in his tracks, a deep scowl on his face.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Onark teased. “Just let me speak to the new lord or lady.” Elitch’s face settled, glaring daggers at the man before him.

“Follow me,” he said bitterly and they continued to the heart of the camp to a large blood-red tent with guards standing at their respective posts. Elitch beckoned for them to stand aside, allowing him to step forward and open the tent flap.

Onark stepped inside the dimly lit cloth palace with his head held high and a practiced look of respect fixed on his face, ready to give a low bow. But to his surprise, the tent was empty. There were contained torches, tables and chairs to the sides and some shallow steps leading up to the lord’s throne, but there was no lord to speak of. He looked around, confused until Elitch moved past him.

“Where’s the lord?” he demanded.

“He just arrived,” Elitch responded evenly, floating up the stairs and slowly sitting on the throne. Onark went slack-jawed. Elitch smirked, squaring his shoulders.

“You’re jesting,” Onark insisted, approaching the steps.

“Unfortunately for you, no. I am not.”

“How?” he wondered aloud.

“Lord Dradir died from a fever. While many of our generals, like Brimig, fell in battle, I started climbing the ranks. Then the last one we had, who was also acting Lord, got taken out. For the past five months, this army has been my to command and protect, so I’ll have you address me as General Elitch.”

Onark gaped, his blood turning to ice. He tried masking his irritation and nerves by cracking one of his charismatic smiles.

“I don’t believe what my eyes are seeing. My little brother, commanding an army. Why aren’t you wearing the

signature drapes or armor?" he asked, pointing at Elitch's faded gray tunic and brown pants.

"I was relaxing in my tent," Elitch said casually. "When a scout spotted someone sneaking around our barride. The stranger bore our flag, but wasn't recognized by any of the soldiers. I came quickly to investigate. Just in time to see you sneak inside."

"I wasn't sneaking," Onark insisted. "I just didn't want to get shot down." He suddenly dipped into an overly dramatic bow. He cleared his throat. "General, I must say that my elation to be in your presence again after all these years cannot be described with words."

"Silence," Elitch spat, holding up a hand. His tone turned from smug to serious and resentful. "You, Onark son of Talrin, have just slandered in my tent. On top of that you are clearly avoiding the topic of your previous desertion."

"Your greatness, if I may," Onark interrupted sarcastically, unable to grasp the absurdity that he was using noble titles for his brother, who had always been significantly weaker and more meek. "I came to tell you that I did not retreat from my duties as a loyal soldier of Dahlios. I was kidnapped and held prisoner on the Western Coast for many months. When I finally escaped I had to lay low in the hills, recovering from wounds and hiding from the enemy," he finished, bowing his head. Elitch listened with an irritated and tired expression, making him almost look older than his brother. He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I believed in you," he said quietly after a long stretch of silence. "I trusted you with my life. So did everyone else. I idolized you like some great hero. The one mother and father trusted to watch over me and our sisters. The one who marched off to war bravely when our kingdom was threatened. The one who protected me in the midst of

battle and went back for men who we thought were lost.” Sadness crept into his voice as he spoke.

“I don’t understand,” Onark said. “I am still that man, brother. I was kidnapped and injured, and now I have returned to you.”

“Well, I’m not the same man,” Elitch replied coldly, getting to his feet. “And I won’t tolerate liars. If you’re so sure that this is some big misunderstanding, you’ll follow me and do exactly as I say.” He marched from the tent and Onark followed uneasily. Anger knotted in his chest as they walked through the camp, drawing many stares. His little brother ordering him around severely wounded his pride, but if he wanted this to work, disrespect was not an option. Whispers of his name spread around the crowds who gathered.

“Onark the great warrior,” they said in low voices. “He’s returned. Yes, the one who saved that whole troop single-handedly. The one who survived a week behind enemy lines.” He flashed smiles at some of the soldiers that gawked at him as he walked to where he feared his resolve would crumble.

“Elitch,” he said, catching up. “What now?” his brother sighed. “I simply don’t understand how this happened. Forgive me for asking, but why on Earth did you want to rise up the ranks. You once told me that you were as happy as could be as a foot soldier. That you would never have the ambition to be anything more.” They left the densest part of the camp.

“I told you, I’m a different man,” Elitch said, not looking at him. “I also remember what you once said to another soldier around the fire, when he asked you why you worked so hard in the army. You told him, ‘You can’t wait for life to come to you. You have to chase it.’”

“You remember that?” Onark asked, barely being able to fish the encounter out of his mind himself.

“It stuck with me,” Elitch admitted. “So when you disappeared, I decided that I couldn’t wait any longer to step up and become a better soldier. For the sake of the war, and for my fellow fighters.” Onark didn’t know what to say to that. They had reached another makeshift barricade. One that they both recognized well. The camp hadn’t moved for years, as this front of the war was stagnant. Buried in a little corner was the smallest of crannies, lined with barbed wire.

“So,” Elitch said, walking towards it and peering through. “When you *disappeared*, you must have been wearing something similar to this,” he gestured at his own clothes. “Considering that your uniform and armor were found in your tent afterwards.” Onark nodded, trying to crack a smile that turned out more like a grimace. He could fake anything he liked to the soldiers, superiors, and women, but not his brother. Because Elitch had observed, and understood. Understood too much.

“And right here. This is where you told me you snuck out through when you disobeyed orders and went back for those men who’d been captured. Is that right?”

“I, er... no, I don’t think it was this spot. A bit further west.” Onark said, fighting to keep eye contact. Elitch’s glare was surprisingly steady and intimidating.

“Oh no, I’m very sure that this is the place you showed me, bragging about your selflessness and stealth. Now, lift your shirt.”

The color drained from Onark’s face.

“Why on Earth would I lift my shirt? It’s rather brisk out and it would be a bit indecent don’t you think?” He placed a hand nervously on his sternum, gripping the collar of his tunic.



“Oh come now, brother,” Elitch teased. “You’ve slept naked save for a thin wool blanket in a freezing winter on Mount Chalice seven years ago when the other men were in more dire need of your clothes. And what decency. I’m your brother, and half the army has bathed in the same pond as you.”

“Don’t be coy,” Onark warned playfully through gritted teeth.

“And the other reason,” Elitch continued. “I am the authority in this here camp. So if you don’t wish to be subjected to public humiliation, I suggest you follow my orders, *brother*.” Onark glared at him for a moment, then lifted his tunic up, exposing his midsection. He had a very tight and muscular abdomen, but across the perfectly sculpted flesh were some shiny white lines running from the top right to the bottom left, sharply turning up and then back down in the middle. Elitch eyed them carefully, as if memorizing them, then removed his belt which held his sword among other weapons and rested it against the wall.

He then approached the cranny and began to squeeze through. He wasn’t as large as his brother but had gotten considerably stronger since the last time the two had met. As he squeezed himself through, he made sure to keep his chest and stomach close to the wall of the small passage, as his brother’s would have been given his size. Elitch winced as the wire raked across his torso. He groaned and muttered some curses, but didn’t stop until he was through. From the other side, Onark could barely see him, but he wasn’t really looking. What he was staring at were the weapons that were left nearby.

It took him awhile, but Elitch managed to scramble back over the top of the barricade and jump back down, panting. He grunted in pain and lifted his tunic, now stained red and torn. There across his abdomen were several bright

red lines, in the exact same pattern as Onark's scars. The older man did not meet his eyes.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Elitch hissed, venom in his voice. "One day for some reason I cannot fathom, you decide that you're leaving the army. But you don't want to look weak or unfaithful to the cause. So you leave behind your weapons and armor, not wanting anyone who might see you on the outside to connect your face to this war. You go and sneak out of the camp using a secret break in the wall that only one other person knew about. Someone who you knew was so blinded by admiration for you that even if he was somehow smart enough to put it together that you deserted your duty wouldn't tell a soul and would in fact, welcome you with open arms when you finally started to miss the rush of battle and thrill of killing." He let out a half-hysterical laugh. It had been a long time since Elitch had discovered what his brother did, and often fantasized about rubbing it in his face one day, and that day was finally here. Onark glared, eyes darting back and forth between his little brother and the weapons behind him.

"So what happens now?" he asked in a very threatening tone. Elitch had a triumphant look on his face after besting the brother that had always been better than him, despite showing so little compassion for others' lives, unless it meant he would get attention.

"You have two options," he said. Onark's face grew red and he ground his teeth together. Elitch, his little brother, giving him, the greatest champion this army had known, an ultimatum? "Either, you rot in this camp as a prisoner of war for deserting the army..."

"Or?" Onark growled, barely audible.

Elitch's expression softened, but only slightly. "Or, you accept my mercy."

Onark looked up, his brow knitting together. "I don't understand."

"Accept my mercy," Elitch repeated. "Return as a faithful soldier. Resume battles and rescue missions as you did before, but this time under my command." Onark balled his fist and barely managed to choke out a response.

"Yes sir."

"And one more thing," Elitch added, almost sadly. "I won't have lies spread around my men when I know the truth. They will be informed of your desertion. They will be rightfully hesitant to trust you with their lives. You will be known as what you truly are."

"And what is that?" Onark spat, nearly foaming at the mouth. Elitch regarded him with sorrowful eyes, which turned stony before he answered.

"A coward."

The words hit Onark's pride like a javelin. In all his years of fighting and leading, he had never ever been called that, not even by spiteful enemies. Perhaps if someone else had said it, things would have ended differently. But no. It was Elitch. His pathetic, weak, foolish younger brother who had always lived in his shadow. The thought of someone so small and powerless calling him a coward was too much, and the anger enveloped him like a poisonous fog, clouding his judgment and burning deep in his chest.

With a furious roar he lunged forward and pinned Elitch to the ground. Staring into his brother's eyes, Onark saw fear, but not surprise. Then he sprang off Elitch's chest and hurried towards the sword laying feet away.

It was never known what really happened to Onark. There was no body, and no sight of him from that day on. General Elitch spoke little of the incident, saying only that his brother's blood was tainted with treason. He never confirmed if Onark was dead or alive, or where he might

have fled to. No details were given about whatever conflict had risen between them. Elitch simply nursed his minor injuries and sustained for several weeks a strangely haunted look that did not suit a twenty-two-year old's face.

Upon hearing the truth about the famed hero, the army was greatly disheartened, ashamed to have worshiped him so. However, their morale and strength swelled from the outrage provoked, allowing Dahlios to make some progress on that front at last. Some soldiers claimed to glimpse the fallen hero on the edge of battlefields when fighting got fierce, swearing that they saw him standing and watching the war unfold, but General Elitch cared not for those reports.

In his last days of service, he only wished that his men would be led with the skill of his brother, though not down the same path. As much as the betrayal bled his heart, he was grateful. For Elitch knew that from that day on, he would be immune to cowardice.

**NONFICTION**  
**Grades 11 & 12**



**Genesis Lopez**  
**Mountain Lake**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

**The Mall**

Seven year old me stood there so still. I held onto my father's hand as we both went on the carousel. My father sat me on the pony with a pink bow. As we went in a circle slowly, I looked at my father with a big smile on my face and said, "I love the mall."

Seventeen year old me now gets out of the car. I link arms with my best friend, and we walk up to this bright shiny building. We walk in and take a deep breath. It smells like coffee. We walked over to the nearest Starbucks and ordered our coffee. As I take my first sip of coffee I look over to my friend and say, "I love the mall."

"The mall is a large retail complex containing a variety of stores and often restaurants and other business establishments housed in a series of connected or adjacent buildings or in a single large building." (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) When I was younger, I would go to the mall with my father all the time. We used to try new things and explore. Now that I'm older, once in a while I'll still go with my family, but I have my own money now and more friends who have the same interests as me. Now I go to the mall a lot more with my friends, but I still catch myself doing the same things, eating the same things, and going to the same places as I did when I was little. Whenever I go to the mall, I have a good time because of the food, quality entertainment, and the people I go with.

I walk into this giant shiny building. A strong aroma comes around. The smell of buttery and salty pretzels flirts

with my nose. There's loud murmuring, and a child crying and yelling, due to not getting what he wanted. I hear giggling and laughter from a little girl riding a pony on the carousel. I watch a group of girls wearing very revealing clothes flirt and giggle while talking to an attractive boy working at the berry smoothie stand. I watch another group of girls walk into Aeropostale. They smile and laugh and look like they all enjoy each other's company.

I ordered my pretzel and ate it at the food court. As I ate my pretzel I watched and listened for anything exciting to happen. A certain bench caught my attention. I remember when I was little my dad sat me down on that bench to tie my shoe. I remember I was wearing a hot pink skirt that had a Hello Kitty print on it with a bright blue shirt that said "peace" with a pink zebra print peace sign on it. I had just gotten new shoes: high-top Converse. I refused to listen to my dad when he told me to tie my shoe. As a result of not listening, I tripped and scraped my knee. I remember crying and a wash of embarrassment fell over me. My dad sat me down on the bench and tied my shoe for me. I remember a lecture coming out of his mouth, but it ended with the words "Por favor solo escucha la próxima vez, solo me preocupo por ti," which means "Please just listen next time, I only care for you."

The first thing I would do when I went to the mall with my dad is tell him that I was hungry. After a few trips to the mall, he realized that I was not actually hungry. It was just my way of saying that I wanted ice cream. My father and I would walk over to the back of the mall. At the time, they had a Dairy Queen. Dad usually ordered a banana split and he would share it with me. There were tiny round tables and little chairs for children to sit and eat their food. I would make my dad sit with me at those tables; to this day it amazes me that he didn't break the chair. As we ate our



banana split, I would always eat the strawberry drizzle part first and leave the rest for my dad. He seemed to be okay with that.

Now that I am older, I do not have to ask for what I want. I get it myself. There is no longer a Dairy Queen in the mall. Now I go get a thick smoothie bowl from Smoothie Blendz. The sweet smell of mango and pineapple fills the air. I watch as the girl puts shavings of coconut on top of my smoothie bowl. She tops it off with a little bit of granola. When I get ready to pay, I almost cry looking at the price of my bowl. I spent twelve dollars on a small bowl with only a few toppings. But every bite I take is so worth it. I share it with some of my friends and they eat most of it. I don't let it bother me because I make them buy me coffee from Starbucks. It is tradition to get Starbucks coffee every time we go to the mall; it helps me throughout all the shopping I do. It also helps me have patience.

In the Barnes and Noble's Starbucks, I take a good look at the menu. I like to look at what they have even though I always end up getting the same thing. The lady is ready to take my order. I get a white chocolate peppermint mocha with foam on the top and a little bit of caramel drizzle. As I wait for my drink to be made, I take in the strong smell of coffee. I look at all the desserts and sandwiches they have. They all look so pretty on display. There's a window that allows sunlight to hit the glass window that covers the desserts. It makes them look even more delicious. I watch as an old man orders just a small plain black coffee. On the other side of me, my friends drink a fruity refresher. I watch as one of the workers top my drink off with the caramel drizzle. I take my first sip and it makes me feel energized. My friends and I walk out of the store, ready to have fun and do some actual shopping.

Next thing I would do with my dad is have fun. I remember one of the movies that was playing at the time in the mall was *The Croods*. The smell of popcorn filled the room. We would share a big bag of buttered popcorn. Dad would get me a bug juice, cherry flavored, and he got a cherry Pepsi. While we sat and waited for the movie to start, we would eat some of the popcorn, but Dad always found a way to sneak a few snacks in so that we could share. We always sat in the middle of the theater; that way we got a good view of the movie but we could also hear it better. It would not be too loud or quiet – just right.

After the movie, we would go play the arcade games that were by the theater. My dad won a pink monkey from a claw machine that I still have today. I never realized how much money he wasted on that stupid monkey; all I know is that I really wanted it and he got me it. After the arcade, he sat down on a massage chair, looking so tired. I was full of energy. I still sat with him. We paid another dollar for a massage. He looked so relaxed. His facial expression was calm and peaceful. We sat there for a few more minutes and I looked at my surroundings. The mall was full of young people. Music played for everyone to listen to, but you couldn't quite make out the lyrics. Loud murmuring and random conversations were taking place. When our message was finally over, we walked over to the front of the mall. I quickly glanced over at a light purple and pink store. I continued to walk with my dad when we suddenly stopped half way. He looked over at me and told me how proud he was of my behavior. He told me that I had a lot of patience and that I was very respectful. As a reward, he handed me a ten dollar bill, and told me that I could spend it wherever I liked.

We made our way back to that light purple and pink store. I forced him to come inside with me – he seemed to be

embarrassed, due to him being the only male. A lady greeted me. “Hi, welcome to Claire’s.” We smiled back and continued to look around the store. It seemed so magical. There was a wall just for glitter. It was all organized by color. We walked over to the jewelry side. I decided to get a gold and pink tiara for myself. My dad looked over and said “Se te me da bien,” which means “It looks good on you.”

Now my friends and I go to the mall to mostly shop. We go to stores that fit our vibes. We try this store called *Dry Goods*. We look around – there's colorful clothes everywhere. We walk up to this wall. They have the same shirt in all sizes all organized in color order. I try on multiple things. One, a pink dress that I still have, makes me look like a princess. Of course, this dress needs a pair of shoes as well. We pay for our clothes and head to Scheels. We go on the escalator, then get distracted and go on it a few more times. As we slowly go up, we can see the whole store. There are people everywhere. We see boys our age, which makes us giggle. They are looking through the baseball aisle. We wave at them, then head to the shoe aisle, where we try on shoes and finally find a pair. They are white Air Forces with silver glitter on the check mark. We walk out of the store with our shoes, say goodbye to the group of boys and giggle some more then leave.

Going to the mall was something I would do ever since I was little. I enjoy going to the mall to this day. I enjoy shopping and eating at the mall. I enjoy going with my family or friends. Whenever I go to the mall I have a good meal, fun entertainment, and quality time with the people I go with. Although my reasons for going to the mall have changed throughout the year, I still have the same fun. Even though I go to the mall with different people, the same smile is still on my face. The mall is like therapy for me. Even though I'm older now, the same mall that I've been going to

since I was seven is the same mall that still brings me the same joy, the same excitement, and the same good time.

**Zach Klassen**  
**Mountain Lake**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

**The Journey, Not the Destination**

Standing on the line, shivering in suspense, I assume my stance and look ahead. The camera cart has just passed, allotting everyone their five seconds of fame. The energy from that moment continues to buzz in the air. Boom! The gun goes off, and everyone surges forward. The noise is deafening as I chase after the cart, surrounded by 500 others. I hear a yell, and I glance to my left to see a group of five guys charging forward in excitement. In my brief distraction, I fail to watch my stride and clip the heel of the runner in front of me. I must take an extra half step to avoid tripping and jostling the person on my left. The scene is so chaotic that my watch gets paused by a competitor who bumps into it, and I do not even notice. This atmosphere is exactly what I anticipated while competing at the Nike Cross Country Regionals.

A day this exciting requires extensive planning. Going to the biggest race of the year without a coach does not happen on its own. Rides, registration, and availability need to be considered so we can include as many people as possible in this event. Finally, after everything is sorted out, our team, the Mountain Lake Mile Munchers, is registered for the Nike Cross Country Regionals thirty minutes before the deadline. Each one of us now has twenty-eight dollars less and excitement worth its weight in gold. We immediately discuss the plans and competition that will be there. However, before we delve too deep into our discussions, a large question

looms overhead: is this an opportunity to achieve a personal best one last time before the season is over, or an occasion to have fun and enjoy the presence of the other 2,000 runners?

Every runner stands at a crossroads. Those who fell short at the state cross-country meet the previous week are eager for redemption, particularly the seniors. The allure of one final race is irresistible for a senior who may never compete again. Others, accepting the season's end, view this race as a lighthearted event. Together, we evaluate the options, adding facts and opinions to each side of an imaginary balance beam, trying to tip the scale towards a decision. Regardless of the choice we make, we know it will be a memorable experience for all.

My alarm goes off at 5:30 AM, and after a few silent moments where the wave of sleepiness seems to overwhelm my mind, a spark of excitement arises against the current. Immediately, I remember that I am waking up this early because Nike Cross Country Regional (NXR) is today. The anticipation seems to scrape my tired head off my pillow and propel me downstairs to begin preparing. People begin to trickle into my house one by one. The same conversation follows with each new face.

“Did you sleep well?” I ask.

“Yeah, I slept fine. I woke up a little earlier than I wanted to, but I’m not as tired as I should be. Did you bring your spikes?”

“No, I said I was just going to have fun today, remember? I’ve already raced enough this season; I’m shot, so I’m just wearing my training shoes,” another friend chimes in.

Someone else adds, “Hopefully Caden isn’t late again.” We chuckle, trying to hide our nervous glances at our watches, only to see our deadline of 6:30 come closer and closer.

“Anyways, what did you have to eat this morning? Your same three French toasts, yogurt, and a glass of milk?” I ask.

“Of course, nothing else sits as well on race day,” comes the reply.

This routine has become almost second nature to us, honed over countless race days throughout the years. If someone wanted to, they could likely predict our pre-race conversation with impressive accuracy. Suddenly, the silent darkness outside is shattered as car lights slice through the night, their beams illuminating the living room. Given the stillness of the early morning, we deduce that the car is likely Caden’s and make our way outside. A mere eight minutes behind schedule, we pile into the vehicle and set off. To an outsider or a neighbor awake at this ungodly hour on a Saturday, this scene would seem mundane. For us, however, it is the exhilarating start of our grand adventure, a moment where we each feel like the protagonist in our own movie.

Off we go, promising ourselves that now is a good time to attempt some sleep during the two-hour car ride. As we turn onto the highway, our bodies seem to remember their sleepiness. The car quiets down until the silence is broken by a single question: “Who do you think is going to win?” Immediately, like a guard caught sleeping during his shift, we are wide awake, filling the car with discussion and debate. The excitement bug that was almost snuffed out comes to life again, blitzing around the car, hardly pausing to let anyone get a sentence in. Seemingly before I even finish sharing who I think will win, someone explains why the course is too flat and it is too cold to favor a runner like him. I guess the senior from Kansas is out of our predictions as we quickly move on to the junior from Wisconsin, who made headway by stealing the show at the Wisconsin state meet earlier in the week. Before we know it, the car has arrived at

the location, and our drive is over. It is time to focus now on our own race.

I look down at my watch to realize we race in less than half an hour, and we have not even found a parking space yet! I motion to a friend, gather my stuff together, and jump out of the car while it is monotonously driving up and down rows, looking for a spot. Others catch on, and we leave our driver to his own fate. Dodging in between cars and hundreds of other runners warming up around the facility, we locate the big tent. Opening the sides, a blast of warm air greets our cold faces. Sadly, there is no time to enjoy it, as we have to get our racing stickers. I ask the friendly lady at the table for a packet for the Mountain Lake Mile Munchers. There are not a lot of packets left at this time, so ours is easy to find. We hurriedly attempted to sort out the available safety pins and put on our numbers.

“Did she say left or right hip?” I ask.

“Both, there are two hip stickers.”

“Were there two stickers la...?”

Someone else injects, cutting me off, “Five minutes till we race; we gotta go!”

My chest number is completely crooked, but I do not have time to care as I sprint over to the starting line. Already, hundreds of athletes have gathered there, ready to race. Some have been warming up for an hour already, while I just got started. The desire to pause and talk to all the other athletes I have not caught up with is overwhelming. The kid I raced last spring in track is to my right, talking with a coach. Two people I always like to find at our home meets are doing their final warmups for the race. Any runner I have ever raced seems to be included in this environment. Before I know it, the gun goes off, and all the people I was admiring surge forward.



The initial rush could easily be mistaken for a charge into battle. Just the sound of the impact each runner makes on the ground is deafening. This is accompanied by yelling, cheering, and the occasional fan with a cowbell. The noise alone acts as a strong tailwind, propelling us forward. Other yelling comes from those next to me. Whether the excitement cannot be contained or they simply want attention is unknown. I do not have the chance to wonder, as I need to continually dodge the footsteps of those running on either side of me. There is such a mass of people that I could not run faster if I tried. It is as tight as crossing an intersection in New York during rush hour. I am running at a good pace without any effort, and the crowd and the other runners push more forward. It is as if all of the atmosphere has taken a physical to aid us in our run. I take in everything around me and push forward, neglecting the fact that I had an insufficient warmup.

Eventually, my fantasy dream slowly fades with the energy in my legs. Only half a mile into a three-mile race, my legs are burning on fumes. What was supposed to work flawlessly, like a well-oiled machine, quickly showed signs of ill care. The cold air and my poor warm-up work together to seize up every necessary joint I have. It feels like my ankles have a rod holding my foot at a 90-degree angle, hindering my mobility. The cold air pierces my desperate lungs. Every heavy breath burns, as it is too cold to take in enough air that my body requires. The feeling of failure and giving up begins to overtake me. Working its way up from my sore ankles and taking a detour in my lungs, it is now desperately fighting for my unwavering attention. I am already fighting my body enough to keep one leg in front of the other, and the fact that I now have to wrestle my mind too is defeating. I give in and slow down; my ankles, knees, lungs, and brain heave a sigh of relief. Everything feels

better except my willpower, which is in quite a distraught mood but which is finally outvoted because this race is just for fun. I trudge along, waiting for my friends to catch up. They eventually find me, and we finish the race together. Everyone, except my determination, who is still sulking in the back of my head, ends with joy and new memories.

We gather our belongings and load ourselves back into the car with tired legs and a couple of new friends on social media. For twenty-eight dollars and two hours of driving each way, we decided it was more than worth it. After we stop at McDonalds for lunch, we promise ourselves that we will finally take a nap on the ride home to combat our tiredness. However, after a few miles, we realize that our day has been too exciting not to exchange every story all over again. With two hours ahead of us, we start from the beginning, standing on the line, shivering in suspense, ready to race.

**Meghan Johnson**  
**Bingham Lake**

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

#### **Thanksgiving Day**

I wake up to the sweet fragrance of homemade cinnamon rolls drifting down the stairs to my room. I add it to my mental list of why Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday. Today kicks off the Christmas season; it offers a memorable time to slow down and enjoy my family's company. We have a unique situation during November and December that reminds us to treasure our time together. Despite the season's chaos, my family's Thanksgiving contains special moments of shared traditions, tasty food, and Christmas preparations.

My family runs a business where 70% of our revenue is generated in the three weeks after Thanksgiving. Work is all-consuming during this season, but my dad always tries to put aside work for Thanksgiving even though tasks pile up. As my siblings and I have grown older, our responsibilities in the business have increased. Since I was little, I have cherished Thanksgiving because it is one of the few days during the holiday season that our family can enjoy a meal together at home.

In addition to the exhausting work schedule surrounding Thanksgiving, I grew up spending every Christmas with extended family in another state. I remember those times fondly, but it meant my family never created Christmas traditions. Thanksgiving became our avenue for traditions and family time. Thanksgiving Day's "ordinary" moments are not taken for granted in our home.

I wander upstairs around nine to watch Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. No one cares too much about most of the parade anymore, but no one dares to suggest breaking tradition. My younger sisters trudge up the stairs after the agreed-upon start time, but their tardiness does not matter because our dad is still trying to figure out how to stream the parade.

My youngest sister, Emily, rubs the sleep from her eyes, blinks, and follows her nose to the kitchen. "Can I take one from the middle?" She pleads hopefully, eliciting a laugh from our mom. Her eyes are glued to her breakfast as my mom coats the cinnamon rolls in sugary icing. Emily reluctantly grabs a roll from the edge as my other sister, Katie, enters the kitchen.

The perfectly golden cinnamon rolls are covered with a thin layer of icing dripping over the sides. I am stuck with a roll from the edge, but I am careful not to miss a small extra piece that broke off my mom's roll.

"Aww, you took the one I wanted!" I exclaim when Katie plops down on the living room floor a few minutes later with her middle cinnamon roll. I hop up to retrieve a blanket for the couch where the rest of us are settled.

"I can't believe people have waited on the streets since three a.m.," I observe, recalling a comment the parade announcers made last year. "At least it's not freezing this year."

We attentively watch as the line-up of this year's performers is displayed. We eagerly await a few, but most are pop-culture artists we have never heard of.

I take one final bite of my cinnamon roll, savoring how it melts in my mouth.

"Who's that?" My dad asks as a new float rides across the screen.

“Some K-pop group,” I reply, uneager to watch their performance.

“K-pop?”

“Korean pop. Mostly boy bands.”

“Oh? Did you know *I* was in a boy band before I met Mom?”

“Haha, Dad,” Emily rolls her eyes. “When are the Rockettes coming up?”

“I don’t know, Em, probably soon. There isn’t much left,” I inform her before returning to the puzzle on our living room floor. We lose interest in the massive balloons and obnoxious performers towards the end.

“Mhm... I can smell the turkey,” Mom rises from her chair and opens the oven. Our house floods with the savory smell of a well-seasoned, roasting turkey. Dad leaves to help her while my sisters and I anticipate the arrival of Santa and his sleigh in New York to signal the end of the parade.

Santa comes and goes, and everyone pitches in to prepare the meal: Emily pours the sparkling water into the cranberry juice, Katie squashes the potatoes and vigorously stirs in the butter, Mom carefully mixes flour into the gravy, Dad separates the light and dark meat as he carves the turkey, and I check the stuffing and rolls to ensure they are not burning before starting the green beans.

“I’ll get condiments!” Emily scurries to the fridge to retrieve practically half its contents.

We finally sit down for the meal after chaotic last-minute preparations are completed. The table is adorned with turkey, mashed potatoes, green beans, stuffing, gravy, rolls, and deviled eggs. My dad prays over the meal, and we dig in.

“These mashed potatoes are the best!” exclaims Emily as she hurriedly shovels more into her mouth. I take a bite, burning my tongue. I quickly set my fork down and

gulp the contents of my glass. I notice a narrow curl of steam rising from the food as the sting of sparkling juice shoots down my throat.

“The stuffing is so good,” Dad closes his eyes to savor each bite of the gravy-drenched dish. “OK, everyone say something from the past month that you’re thankful for.” He steers our conversation onto a more focused trajectory.

We reflect on and recount recent events and opportunities we cherished. Mentions of family vacations, God’s provision, and sweet friendships dominate the remainder of our conversation. Each person is overflowing with gratitude.

After the last bite of buttery rolls and juicy turkey disappear from our plates, we dig out Tupperware containers from their hiding places in the cabinets.

“Leftovers are the best part!” Dad’s enthusiasm is evident as he imagines the turkey sandwiches he will enjoy this week. “OK, I need to run to work quickly, but I should be back in less than an hour. Don’t bother waiting for me on the tree.” He leans over to kiss my mom before heading out the door.

“When should we have pie?” Emily asks Mom, remembering the frozen peanut butter pie she made last night. I had advocated for a traditional apple pie but was outvoted.

“Let’s wait a bit. Maybe after we put up the tree.” Mom answers.

The sink drain gurgles as Mom sets the last dripping dish out to dry. My sisters take their cue and scramble to the garage to retrieve the Christmas tree. We still use the same tree my dad grew up with. It’s old, but Mom prefers a little dust to sticky sap and fragile pine needles.

“OK, I cannot wait any longer,” I tell my sister with a smirk. I grab my phone to cue up our family’s favorite

Christmas album before helping my sisters haul the poky branches inside.

The first song begins with a beautiful composition of strings, then is joined by melodic keys. “The King is coming...” we all begin to sing along. It finally feels like Christmas. I dance around the room as my itch for Christmas music is finally scratched. I almost listened a few days ago, but the shorter listening window adds significance.

We unearth decorations from the basement while we wait for Dad to come home and string the lights. The only other person who has put lights on our tree is my older brother, Eli. Dad got his old tree-decorating job back last year when Eli moved to NYC for college.

After returning home, Dad dutifully strings the lights. He skillfully incorporates one strand of twinkle lights throughout the ordinary ones to create a subtle glittering effect.

“Are these the same as last year?” Dad holds up two separate strands. “The regular ones are cool, but the twinkle lights are warm.”

“These were the only ones downstairs,” I offer. “Just try them.”

Dad is pessimistic, but he obeys.

“They’re the same ones,” Katie states matter-of-factly. “It’ll look fine once the ornaments are on.”

“They better,” I reply, unsure. “We do *not* need to buy more lights.”

By the time the tree is primed for decoration, I have lost all enthusiasm. However, my lack of faith in my sisters’ decoration abilities leads me to grab a box of ornaments anyway.

“I call the gold names of God!” Emily shouts, rushing to snatch up the box containing her favorite collection of ornaments. We have three sets of ornaments

displaying the names of Jesus. The ornate, gold-lettered ones hail from Isaiah 9, the elaborate silver crowns are the royal names, and the metal and wooden ones display Messianic names. I place the last of a set on a green plastic branch, carefully bending the branch up to keep the ornament on.

“Hey, I wanna do those!” Katie yells as I pick up the crowns. “I always put those up!”

“And I always put these up!” Emily declares as she hastily hangs the “Emmanuel” ornament.

“Glad I didn’t choose those first,” I mutter. I know I have done each set before, but I do not want to poke a hornet’s nest.

I circle the tree to even out the ornaments and fill the bare sections. I shift the “Anointed One” ornament a couple of branches to the right and delicately move a glittering silver snowflake further from its twin. Mom concludes the decorating with an executive decision to postpone the nativity until we finish our workday tomorrow.

Emily pounds down the stairs to grab the peanut butter pie from the freezer. Katie clicks on the TV to cue up a Hallmark Christmas movie. Our dad is slightly disappointed he got stuck watching *another* Hallmark movie, but he complies for our sake.

I cut a generous slice of pie, nudge the silverware drawer closed, and crash on my favorite chair in the living room. I devour the creamy pie before the movie barely has a chance to start. Contentment settles over the room as we get lost in the movie.

Later, as I set my alarm to 6:30 for work tomorrow, I consider the impact of gratitude. Thanksgiving remains my favorite holiday because I love the focus on thanking God for his provision and blessings. My family may have to work hard and spend most of the Christmas season exhausted, but it is God’s means of provision for us. It is important to



remember to carry a mindset of gratitude into the coming season as Christmas approaches and our lives become overwhelming. Thanksgiving itself is a blessing to be grateful for as we trade worries and problems for a day of treasured family time and cherished memories.



## **The History of the Annual Creative Writing Contest**

**Sponsored by Southwest Minnesota State University  
& Southwest West Central Service Cooperative**

The Creative Writing Program at Southwest Minnesota State University, working in partnership with Southwest West Central Service Cooperative, designed and conducted the first annual Creative Writing Contest in the spring of 2005.

The contest was subtitled *Giving Voice to the Youth of Southwest and West Central Minnesota* and was established to encourage a love of language and writing among the region's young people. We wanted to recognize gifted young writers in this area of Minnesota. That first annual contest unearthed a wealth of talent and demonstrated the desire of our young people to tell their stories and express their imaginations through writing. The endeavor was so successful that SMSU and SWWC Service Cooperative have continued the contest on an annual basis. We are proud to note that the Creating Space Writing Contest is now in its 20<sup>th</sup> year as a collaborative outreach effort that supports young writers in our region.

The contest is open to all students in grades 3-12 attending public, private or home schools within the 18-county area of southwest and west central Minnesota. Students may enter the contest through a classroom assignment or on their own. The categories for submission are Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry. Students are allowed to enter in more than one category.

Once submitted, the student's written work is first screened by SMSU creative writing students. Each submission is read by multiple student judges. The finalists are then submitted to the final judges, faculty in the SMSU English Program.

Prizes are awarded for the top three winners in each category and grade group. The most coveted prize for the contest is one of the \$2,000 SMSU tuition scholarships awarded to the three first-place winners in the 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> grade categories.

The highlight of the contest is the Annual Creating Spaces Awards Ceremony, hosted by the SMSU Creative Writing 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 a copy of the *Creating Spaces* anthology in which the winning pieces from every category and group are published. The first-place winners in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade category for fiction, nonfiction and poetry each receive an SMSU First-Year Tuition Scholarship. This celebration begins with a keynote address by a published Midwest writer followed by a reception where the student writers meet each other, the SMSU student and faculty judges, and the keynote author.

## **Keynote Speakers at the Creating Spaces Writing Contest**

2005 – Larry Gavin  
 2006 – Rebecca Fjelland Davis  
 2007 – Bill Holm  
 2008 – Vincent Wixon  
 2009 – Mary Logue  
 2010 – Kristin Cronn-Mills  
 2011 – Rebecca Fjelland Davis  
 2012 – Nicole Helget and Nate LeBoutillier  
 2013 – Thomas Maltman  
 2014 – Saara Myrene Raappana  
 2015 – James A. Zarzana  
 2016 – Christine Stewart-Nuñez  
 2017 – James Autio  
 2018 – Geoff Herbach  
 2019 – Megan Maynor  
 2020 – Terri Michels  
 2021 – Shannon Gibney  
 2022 – Xavier Pastrano  
 2023 – Lauren Carlson

### **2024 Keynote Presenter: Anna Fitzer**

Growing up in rural Minnesota, Anna Fitzer spent most of her time outdoors playing in nature. Throughout her life she has been involved in many forms of performing and visual arts, as well as creative writing. After graduating from Southwest Minnesota State University in 2014 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Spanish, she taught early childhood in the Twin Cities area. Anna used her language, art, and music skills to entertain and educate youth for many years.

Currently, she resides in NE Minneapolis with her husband, two cats and a snake. She works as a full-time artist with the business she created in 2021, Gnarled by Nature. The focus of the business encompasses all of Anna's artforms, refining gems and fossils she has found, as well as writing music and her second book, *The Underworld Prophecies Volume II*.

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