

CREATING SPACES

2025

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

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POETRY
Grades 3 & 4

Piper Meinerts
Luverne

1st Place

Pine Tree

How come your leaves don't get brown?
How come you stay alive?
How come the other trees do die?
For the flowers do, the bushes too.
But you just stay alive.

Piper Meinerts
Luverne

2nd Place

Rose

The pretty scarlet feathers you wear
The raindrops you catch on your tongue
Your rosy cheeks so bright and happy
Your dress of thorns keeping you safe

I know I'll have to say goodbye
But I know I'll see you next year
So when you leave I won't be sad
I will just stay happy

**Julia Schroeder
Hutchinson**

3rd Place

Twins

Your twin may be wacky,
Your twin may be calm.
Your twin may be wild,
Your twin may be sweet.
Always connected, no matter how far,
A million miles, or in the same car.

FICTION
Grades 3 & 4

Vivienne Tatge
Beaver Creek

1st Place

The Adventurists

It was a normal day at Hills-Beaver Creek Elementary school. After recess, Mr. Holthaus the principal announced that the students were going to have chicken nuggets for lunch.

The students were very excited because they thought it was the best food. The morning flew by and all the kids were hungry. Soon it was lunch and everyone was enjoying it except Ella. She was a very picky eater. She went to dump her lunch tray but dropped two of her nuggets without realizing it.

The chicken nuggets sat and waited until everybody was gone.

When the room emptied, the chicken nuggets went into the kitchen and got a ketchup packet and made it explode. They got so messy. Next, they went into the gym and found a bouncy ball. They were having fun until the gym teacher came in. They were so nervous they were going to be caught, but found a basketball rack and hid behind it. He went into his office and then they quickly went into the cafeteria. They noticed a new room and headed that way. They realized they were in the library. They found a book that had lots of pictures they enjoyed. They did not realize how long they had been out and about.

Then a big herd of children came in so they hid in the bookshelf. They waited, waited, and waited before they came out. The teacher was still there, they were so scared. Suddenly, the teacher ran over to them so they ran back in and went out the other way. They were huffing and puffing. Finally, they found this room that had shining lights. Nobody was in the classroom. It was peaceful.

Suddenly, they heard somebody talking. It was... French Fry.

They were super excited because they were bored of each other. French Fry ran over to them. He said, "Have you seen the burger?"

"No. Why? Should we go find him?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Because he is in the preschool room, and it is crazy in there!"

"So can we go there together or not?"

"I guess we can, but it is going to be hard because the toddlers will... eat you."

"Wait, what!"

"Yeah, I know."

"Let's go!"

The chicken nuggets and French Fry were running through the hallway when they ran into a ketchup packet!

He was angry because his brother had been killed not too long ago.

The chicken nuggets froze right away and looked at each other.

They finally admitted that they had done it.

The ketchup packet froze.

He said, "It's okay, as long as you let me come with you."

They were shocked.

Then Fry explained that they were going to see Burger in the preschool room.

“Yes!” said Ketchup.

“You actually want to come?” asked French Fry.

“Yes! Of course, I want to come.”

“You know it is going to be hard.”

“Yeah, let's go!”

Once they got there, they were surprised. The room was empty! They went to the desk then they heard the children come in and they panicked.

Ketchup said, “Let’s hide in the fake kitchen!”

They hid so long until it was pitch black!

Thankfully, they were right next to the light switch. They stacked on top of each other. Ketchup, of course, was on top because he was fragile. They made sure to look all around them because they thought someone could come in. They turned the light on and ran as fast as they could. They ripped the drawer open. They were shocked. Hamburger was missing. There was a note that said, I am in the tallest cupboard. They were happy that they found him, but it was going to be hard to get the tallest cupboard.

They thought for a while, until French Fry said, “Look, we did this for a reason!”

“For what reason?” Ketchup asked.

“So, all the people like us could meet up,” Fry said. Fry also said, “Look, a step stool, then we can get to the cupboard! Come on, what are we waiting for!”

They climbed up.

Then Nugget said, “We have a problem. How are we going to open the cupboard?”

“I will swing and grab the handle and open it,” said Fry.

So he did it, and it worked!

Hamburger jumped out and yelled, “Thank you so much!”

Hamburger started singing and they all started dancing!

That was until the principal came in. They were tired and scared, but he didn’t sound mad when he said, “Come with me.”

They got to the office and he asked, “Do you want to be the school mascot?”

“Um ... yes!” they exclaimed.

Later on, they became the most popular mascot in the state. They were called the Adventurists.

Samuel Engels
Ivanhoe

2nd Place

When Stuffed Animals Come to Life

One night, I went to bed and fell asleep. As I was dreaming, I saw myself walking through our grove, exploring. I was climbing over rotten logs and ducking under low-hanging branches when I felt some extremely poky burrs on my cheek, so I brushed them away. I sat down on a sturdy bark-covered log to watch the birds. Then I felt a slobbery lick that awakened me. Jazz, my stuffed dog was licking me!

I giggled. "Jazz, how are you alive?" I asked.

"Woof!" She responded. She licked my face again.

I began to realize that the poky burrs on my other cheek had been the spines of Hedgie, my stuffed hedgehog.

"You're alive, too?!"

Hedgie just grinned and crawled out of his bed under my covers.

Jazz clung to me, and Hedgie held on to Jazz as I crawled out of bed and climbed down from the top bunk of my bed.

I went downstairs. They followed me.

I walked over to the patio door. They followed me.

I looked out. They looked outside, too.

"Wow, it snowed a lot overnight!" I announced.

"Oh, no! I should be hibernating!" Hedgie exclaimed.

"Arf! That looks like FUN to me!" Jazz barked. She bounded around the family room, her tail hitting the furniture like crazy.

I made my breakfast: toast with peanut butter and honey. I stood by the toaster to wait. They did too.

I walked to the table with my plate. They did too.

I ate my breakfast. They followed every move I made with their eyes as I ate each bite.

I got the milk out of the refrigerator. They followed me to the fridge and back.

I poured a cup of milk, and then drank it. They watched.

I did my chores. They still followed me. I thought, "Maybe I could train them to do some chores if this keeps up?"

"Now I'm done with my chores, so I can play with you," I explained.

Whap!

Bump!

Whap-whap-whap!

Bump!

The noise came from the stairs. Curious, I ran over to the landing. There was Daisy, my stuffed seal!

"Daisy, you've come to life, too?!" I exclaimed.

"Bark-bark!" Daisy replied. She thumped over to the door. Then she barked and whapped the door with her flipper to show me that she wanted to go out into the snowstorm.

"Do you want to go outside, or what?" I asked Daisy. She nodded vigorously.

"It's too cold out!" trembled Hedgie.

"Then ride on someone to keep warm," responded Jazz.

Hedgie thought awhile. "Ok. Fine."

Jazz crouched down so Hedgie could climb up onto her back.

"Playing outside in the snow sounds like fun to me!" I told them. I went to the closet to put on my snowpants.

Jazz and Daisy wildly bounded around the entryway closet, since they were so excited to be going outside.

"Whoa! Be a little more careful, you almost knocked me over!" I shouted.

"Yeah! You are going very fast and I'm scared!" yelled Hedgie.

"Okay!" Jazz shouted.

I hurried to get my boots on before they could tip me over. Then I put on my winter jacket, hat and gloves. Now I was ready for anything the weather could throw at me.

When we went outside, Daisy and Jazz ran around like crazy, and snow was flying everywhere. Hedgie was clinging to Jazz with all his strength. When they calmed down, we decided to build an igloo.

Jazz dug snow into a circle, and I showed Daisy how to form the snow into walls. Her flippers were perfect for packing snow. I carried water to make the snow stick better. The roof was going to be a challenge. I decided to search the yard for places where the wind had packed the snow into hard drifts. Maybe we could cut some large chunks from those to use for the roof of our igloo.

I found a nice big drift with hard, packed snow, and I cut some pieces from it. I brought them to the igloo and put them in place. They teetered on the edge, so I moved them a little farther out from the center. I went back with Daisy and Jazz following me. They hauled more pieces back to the igloo while I cut them. When we had a decent pile of roof

pieces at the igloo, we put them in place to see if we had enough. We needed one more piece for the top, so I went over to the drift and cut one more large piece out of it. It fit perfectly!

When the igloo was finished, we all went inside. It was nice to enjoy the protection from the swirling snow and frigid winds.

"It's a lot warmer in here than it is outside," exclaimed Hedge.

"That's because the snow blocks provide insulation," I explained.

Daisy laughed and barked, "My blubber is my insulation!"

"Don't bound around too much in here, Jazz, or you'll knock it down!" I said.

Everyone laughed. The animals went outside and played again in the snow. Hedge was still clinging to Jazz, and Jazz was being careful not to fall. Jazz and Daisy pushed up snow to make a bunch of big mounds to run and slide over. They were slipping and sliding and having LOTS of fun.

I decided I was thirsty after all that work. I couldn't think of any better way to get some cool refreshment than a fresh icicle from the barn roof. I walked over to the steel roof of the barn to look for the biggest one. I found it right in the middle of the west side of the barn. I was jumping for the icicle when... Whoosh! A bunch of snow came sliding off the barn roof, knocking me down.

Whooooosh!!!!!! More snow came and buried me.

Five minutes later

"It's time for lunch!" Mom yelled.

Jazz and Daisy ran to tell me, but then they realized I was missing. Daisy climbed and slid frantically over the mounds to try to find me.

When they still didn't see me, Jazz's nose hit the ground.

Sniff.

Sniff.

Sniff. She ran, following my scent, with Hedgie still bouncing on her back.

SSnniiff. She headed toward the barn, then ran a circle around the snow pile where my scent was the strongest.

"Hedgie," Jazz said, "please burrow in right here and see if Samuel is here."

"No!"

"What if you get to pick what we do after lunch?"

Daisy rolled her eyes. She wanted to play outside in the snow all day, but if this was how Samuel would be found, it would be fine.

"Well... okay," replied Hedgie reluctantly before he began tunneling into the snow.

In no time, Hedgie popped his head out and said, "Samuel is right there! Dig ASAP – whatever that means!"

"It stands for as soon as possible, Hedgie," said Jazz, as snow flew behind her.

When they uncovered me, Jazz licked the snow from my face, and Daisy wiped and batted at my jacket and snowpants to clean the snow off.

I smiled and stood up. "Thanks for searching for me. That snow was so heavy, I couldn't get up."

"Why were you under there, anyway?" asked Jazz.

"Well, I was jumping for an icicle, when a lot of snow suddenly came off the roof and knocked me down on my back. Then a second avalanche came off the roof,

covering me up and pinning down my legs and arms. Fortunately, the snow left a pocket of air over my face so I could breathe."

"We're so happy to find you! Your mom said, 'It's time for lunch!'" barked Daisy.

"And I get to pick what we do after lunch!" Hedgie grunted.

When we got inside, I took off all my outdoor gear and put it by the furnace vent to dry.

I ate two hamburgers for lunch. Whenever Mom and my sister weren't looking, I tossed pieces of burger under the table to Hedgie, Jazz and Daisy until they were satisfied.

After lunch, Hedgie wanted to play tag, so we did. Even my sister joined in. Jazz and Hedgie were pretty fast, and Daisy had a lot of tricky slide techniques.

Later, Hedgie said, "We can play hide-and-seek now!"

That was fun, too, but, of course, Hedgie was the best at hiding because of his small size.

I had just wriggled into my best hiding place behind the couch in the loft, when, suddenly, Mom yelled, "Samuel, get down here on the double and sweep up all this hamburger you spilled under the table at lunch! I thought you ate two hamburgers, but I think it looks like most of one of them is lying in pieces all over the floor."

Kai Wiertzema Hills

3rd Place

The Day Kai Shrunk

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be as small as a marble?

Well, I have been that size!

My name is Kai, and I work at a chicken strip factory. My job is to deliver the chicken strips to the store. One day it was my lunch break, so I went to my office, grabbed my sub and a Mountain Dew, and sat down on my chair. I was starving because I did not get very much time to eat breakfast. When I twisted my Mountain Dew it went, “Sshhss!” I took a sip and it happened.

I was shrinking! I was as small as a marble. I was so high on my chair it felt like I was ten feet up in the air. So, I tried to climb down. Eventually I got down. It took a long time. I ran to where they were bagging the chicken strips to ask for help. I screamed for help but no one heard me. I waved my hands back and forth, but no one saw me. I climbed up where they package the chicken strips and tried one more time to get someone's attention.

I trudged up what felt like a chicken strip mountain. I was so tired when I got to the top that I had to sit down and catch my breath. When I looked up, I was almost to the end of the conveyor belt. I had to think fast before I fell and broke all of my bones. I was about to jump off when a worker picked up the chicken strip I was on and shoved it in

a bag! I started screaming, “No! No!” He sealed the bag shut. I thought I was never going to get out of here. Then they carried me in the bag to the delivery truck. It was so cold in the chicken strip bag because they were in a freezer. To stay warm, I snuggled with a chicken strip. The ride to the store was really bumpy and heavy. There were other chicken strip bags piled on top of me. It felt like I was at the bottom of a cold snow pile. The truck stopped with a hard brake. I was thinking the truck got in a car accident, but we just stopped at the store.

Then the delivery driver opened the back and grabbed a cart. He started putting the bags of chicken strips on it. When he put the bags in the freezers in the store, I was still snuggled up with the chicken strip. I didn’t think I would survive. He put my bag in the front of the freezer. When I heard some people talking about what they needed, I recognized the voices.

“Mom! Dad! Help me! I’m in here!” I yelled.

They did not hear me, but they took the bag of chicken strips I was in and bought more stuff. They went to check out and go home. When we got home, I heard they were having chicken strips for supper. I was so happy because I could not stay in that bag any longer.

When the bag opened, I saw the light! I’m going to live, I thought! My dad started to dump the chicken strips in the air fryer and I screamed, “Nooooooooo!”

My dad heard me and said, “Kai? Is that you?”

I said, “Yes!”

Then he took the chicken strips out one by one and found me.

He said, “Hailee! I found Kai!”

My mom said, “How did you shrink?”

I explained I was taking a sip of my Mountain Dew when I shrunk.

She said, “How will you grow back to your real size?”

“I think I have to drink Diet Mountain Dew,” I said.

So, my mom got me a cup of Diet Mountain Dew and put a plastic stir straw in it because I was too little to drink out of a real straw. When I took a sip, I felt myself growing. I was so excited I hugged my mom and dad and said, “I am starving!”

“What are you hungry for?” my mom asked.

I thought for a second...

“CHICKEN STRIPS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

POETRY
Grades 5 & 6

**McCoy Ackerman
Slayton**

1st Place

Backyard Baseball

Backyard baseball he hits a home run it's gone they lost the ball it's in the U-Haul the boys are shook the dad's mad and mom says, that's backyard baseball. The bat snaps and the kid feels bad but my mom says that's backyard baseball. Summer is hot and that is why we drink frozen soda pop when you hear the ball go pop you know you need to go to the shop. Your favorite team is on but the remote goes drop right into the frozen soda pop. The TV drops the couch goes plop on a frozen soda pop the mom's eyes dropped as the couch went pop. Grandpa lofted on the only surviving chair – he said, that's backyard baseball.

**Maggie Keller
Slayton**

2nd Place

The Group Project

My deadbeat partner is staring at the wall.
She is doing nothing, not anything at all.
She goes to the bathroom for the hundredth time.
She doesn't do any work; all she does is whine.
She doodles on the research page.
OH MY GOSH! I'm filled with rage!
Oh good, we got one sentence done.
Twelve pages to go; wow, that'll be fun...
Sharpening her pencil, the twentieth time's the charm.
By the time she's done sharpening, she'll be missing an arm.
She moans to the teacher, "My stomach! My head!
I better go to the nurse and lie down on the bed."
When she gets back, she turns to me.
"Are you finished? Cause you'd better be!
I want an A, not an F!"
My deadbeat partner is guilty of essay theft.

**Eleanor Schroeder
Hutchinson**

3rd Place

Wind

Swaying in the breeze
in perfect harmony,

making the leaves fall,
covering the ground in colors,

making my hair fly, it
sweeps across my face

moving so gently,
a dancer twirling across the stage.

What a windy day!

FICTION
Grades 5 & 6

Jack Behrends
Worthington

1st Place

The Predicament

“Johan to the office, Johan to the office,” the announcement speaker blared.

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,” sounded the class like an alarm.

“Johan, go to the office,” demanded the teacher while holding an ice pack to his head.

Johan’s shoes squeaked while walking down the hall into the principal’s office.

“Come in. Do you know why you’re in here?” said Mr. Smith.

The door slammed shut as Johan stepped into the office. It had been the third day this week he had gotten in trouble, and it was only Wednesday. Johan wasn’t new to getting in trouble; in fact, this was the third school he had been in this year. Growing up in a bad part of Los Angeles, Johan was attracted to wrongdoing, from stealing loaves of bread from local stores for food to stealing clothing from Goodwill. His house was more like a shack, and his dad, who always brought a smile out of him, died in 2021 in a car crash. Times had been rough since then, his mom bouncing from job to job, living from paycheck to paycheck. Johan was living it rough.

His school life wasn’t getting any better.

“You’re one strike away from getting kicked out of the school,” Mr. Smith yapped. “From putting a pin on Mrs.

Mary's chair, to putting a dent into the wall by throwing a chair, and now you kicked Mr. James's chair out from under his feet! This is your final strike!"

Johan's face, red as an apple and with a voice trembling like a prisoner of war being interrogated by the enemy, choked out, "I, I, I'm sorry sir, I meant it as a joke."

Mr. Smith responded, "Well, it is no joke! One more thing, and you're out of here."

The bell rattled and the school day was over. While on the walk home, his head drifted to a place it had never been before.

"How can I be good? Why am I bad?" he questioned himself.

"Boy, you betta get in here, it's about to rain," shouted a familiar voice.

"Grandma!" yelled Johan.

Johan's grandmother had been taking care of Johan since his Dad died.

Johan dashed inside like a cat running away from a dog.

"Your mom's been looking at a place in Idaho. The town is called New Meadows, and it has a great view of Granite Mountain," Johan's grandma declared.

"That sounds awesome," Johan replied.

He walked inside.

That night while Johan was in bed, he thought, "I'll try to be good tomorrow."

Johan drifted into sleep, and that night, the thunder boomed, lightning flashed, and rain poured. "Maybe tomorrow will be different," he thought.

“Rise and shine, breakfast is ready,” Johan's grandmother said.

“Five more minutes!” Johan replied with the raspy voice that he got in the morning.

She demanded, “No! It's seven o'clock, and you better get up.”

Johan got up, brushed his teeth, and combed his hair. He ate his breakfast and was on his way to school. That day, all the teachers checked their chairs before they sat down, walked on the opposite side of the class as Johan, and held their chairs while sitting down.

When Johan got home, his grandma said, “Your mom found the house; we're going in one week. She also called the school, and the school said that they don't accept kids who have been kicked out four times. You will be good.”

Those words shook Johan. For the next week, he would have to be good at school, and he knew Mr. Smith would not be forgiving. So the next day, Johan walked to school, his face paler than a tortilla. Everybody knew something was up. He was acting nice, unlike before where he had been unfriendly and just mean.

Johan figured he might as well make some friends before he left. He was a man on a mission. First was James, who was a good kid, but who talked too much. Then there was Jamal, the perfect match: nice, caring, and honest. A little too honest, but that didn't matter 'cause he was a friend. Johan told him everything, about where he was going to live and all things he was going to do. He told him about what the school had said.

“Really, haven't you gotten kicked out three times?” questioned Jamal.

“Yeah, I'm one strike away from being kicked out of this school,” Johan answered, chuckling.

The bell sounded and the school day was over. When Johan got home, he ate and told his Grandma about his day.

Johan told his Grandma, "I met Jamal. He's super nice, and I told him all about Idaho."

"You better not have told him about what the school said," Grandma warned.

"Oh, no I didn't," Johan chuckled nervously.

"Good, I don't want them trying to get you into trouble," she said sternly.

The next day at school when Johan walked in, he saw a flier that said, "Bounty for five dollars in place for Johan Watson. How to claim; get him in trouble!"

Just then, Nancy from the third period fell right in front of Johan.

"He tripped me!" she screamed.

"What, no, I didn't!" he bawled.

"Johan come here!" demanded a familiar voice. It was Mr. Smith!

Johan's heart dropped and hit the floor, or that's what it felt like.

Johan shouted, "I didn't do it!"

"Are you sure?" Nancy said.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure," Johan said.

"He didn't do it," Jamal blurted out.

"Nancy, did he do it?" questioned Mr. Smith.

Nancy begrudgingly admitted to Mr. Smith, "No, he didn't."

Mr. Smith pulled Nancy into the office. Johan and Jamal were astonished at the fact that Nancy, an all-around good kid, had tried to do something.

"Thanks for that," Johan said.

Jamal replied, "Yeah, anytime,"

Jamal was there every moment of the day protecting Johan from getting in trouble – from James telling the teacher that Johan pushed him in the hall, to Jazzy telling the math teacher that he stole her lunch money.

This went on for three more days; then, on the day he was leaving, he walked in the door and saw a note that read, "Bounty now raised to \$20." Johan was shocked. He was getting picked up at 11:00. He just needed to stay out of trouble till then. Just then, Justin, from the first period, flew by and Johan just stepped away.

"One problem avoided," he thought.

Just then Mr. Smith said, "Come here!"

"What, why, what did I do?" Johan questioned.

"Just come here," Mr. Smith demanded.

He pulled Johan into the office, but just before the door shut he saw Justin hand Jamal a twenty-dollar bill.

Johan was flabbergasted by Jamal's sudden turn on him.

"Do you know what this is?" questioned Mr. Smith.

Johan squeezed his eyes shut; he was too scared to answer. He was sure that Jamal, his so-called friend, had gotten him in trouble to get money from Justin.

"Well, since you won't answer, I'll tell you. It is your homework. It fell out of your bag. Jamal found it on the floor," said Mr. Smith smiled. Your friend Jamal just wanted me to give it back to you.

Johan replied, "Well, why did you make such a big deal out of it?"

"Jamal told me to make it look like you were in trouble so he can claim that money from the bounty," Mr. Smith said.

"Why would he want to do that, and why didn't you take the bounty poster down?" Johan said.

Mr. Smith replied, "It was super glued to the wall, and as far as your first question, you'll have to wait and see." Mr. Smith smiled a coy smile.

Mr. Smith let him out, and when he got back to the homeroom, there was pizza, soda and most importantly, his mom and grandma.

"What are you doing here?!" Johan screamed.

"It's a goodbye party," his grandma said.

They ate, laughed, and had fun.

Johan exclaimed, "Bye, thank you."

"Yeah, any time," replied Jamal.

"Bye!" yelled the class.

While walking out Johan found a receipt on the ground that read "3 small pizzas and 2 pops total \$20."

"Hey, look at this," Johan said, "What is it?"

"Ohhhh, never mind," Jamal said.

Johan hopped in the car; the engine roared, and they were off.

Naomi Rete
St. James

2nd Place

Lumberella

Once upon a time in a wooded dark forest, a young girl with short brown boots and a blue plaid shirt stood with a fierce look upon her face. Her name was Lumberella. Lumberella looked admiringly at a thick, budding tree with eye-catching flowers, the color of fluffy cotton candy. Suddenly a short woman stood firm and said angrily, “Get to work Ella. You have a bellyful of trees to timber down.”

“Yes, Stepmother,” exclaimed Lumberella with a soft voice.

In a few moments, the dark forest turned into a bright prairie. Lumberella walked home and ate her dry, brown oatmeal that she ate each day.

“Lumberella!” snapped her stepmother, “What are you doing? Get to bed.”

Lumberella shuffled up the winding stairs and into her bedroom. Lumberella didn't like her bedroom; it was small and not even close to her stepsisters' rooms. In one corner of her bedroom stood a bed. In the other corner, a small desk and a large circle window that faced the sunset.

The next morning Lumberella heard some talking; it was not her sisters' voices, nor her stepmother's. Lumberella crept down her winding stairs into the living room and peeked into the kitchen. A young man with large arms and thick legs sat on a kitchen chair, talking to her stepmother and sisters.

“There will be a Lumberjack Competition on Saturday,” the young man explained. “This year is the twenty-fifth celebration of the Lumberjack Competition, so we decided to have a Lumberjill Competition this year. Everyone knows that the Lumberjack prince needs a bride, so the first-place winner of the Lumberjill Competition will be the Lumberjack’s bride. You are all invited to compete or watch. Good-Bye!”

As soon as the young man was done talking, Lumberella scrambled back up to her bedroom.

“I am the best Lumberjill in the whole world,” she said to herself. “I will win this competition and marry the Lumberjack prince.”

Once Lumberella was done talking to herself, she skipped happily down to the kitchen and ate her breakfast. She then marched to the next forest she needed to cut down. Lumberella was determined; she was going to cut down all the trees in the forest to practice for the Lumberjill competition. In seconds, Lumberella could cut down a single tree. Suddenly the Lumberjill Queen appeared; she was draped in a vibrant pink dress and hovering over the flowers that had been slaughtered from the tree.

“Lumberella, what are you doing?” asked the Lumberjill Queen.

“I am training for the Lumberjill Competition,” explained Lumberella as she cleaned up the branches that had fallen.

“You don’t need to train,” the Lumberjill Queen said. “You just have to believe that I will help you and you will win the competition.”

“Wow,” exclaimed Lumberella. “I believe that you will help me, but I don’t have a Lumberjill suit.”

“I can make you a Lumberjill suit,” said the Lumberjill Queen, “but you must immediately return home once you are done competing.”

“Okay,” said Lumberella. “But what if I don’t get home on time?”

“You will find out on your own,” said the Lumberjill Queen with a smirk. She vanished in a puff of smoke.

As the Lumberjill Queen left, Lumberella found herself in a real Lumberjill suit. The suit had a crimson plaid shirt with golden buttons and bright blue overalls. And Lumberella actually had beautiful, brand new short brown boots!

“This is the best suit ever,” said Lumberella. “I know I can win.”

When the day of the contest came, Lumberella's stepmother said, “Lumberella, I'm going out with your sisters to a contest, but you will have to stay here.”

Lumberella watched her stepmother and sisters strut out the door. She then got her Lumberjill suit on and rushed out the door to find the Lumberjill Queen in a log truck waiting for her to hop in and get to the contest.

“Lumberella,” said the Lumberjill Queen, “do your stepmother or sisters know that you are going to the contest?”

“No,” said Lumberella. “They have no clue that I am coming.”

“Good,” claimed the Lumberjill Queen as they went on driving.

When they got to the Lumberjack and Jill contest, Lumberella spotted her mother and sisters across the field. As soon as the Lumberjack King announced for the contest to start, Lumberella was ready to compete. First, the young Lumberjacks would go, and then the young Lumberjills. Finally, it was Lumberella’s turn. As she stood at her log,

which was stiff with thick brown bark, the announcer hollered, "Ready. Get set. Lumber!" Lumberella chopped and chopped. The crowd roared, and Lumberella felt magical. She was already halfway through the log.

Suddenly the log dropped. She had won the contest! The crowd roared louder and louder.

"Oh no," said Lumberella. She needed to get home! Lumberella ran as fast as a shooting star.

When Lumberella got home, she realized she had dropped her hatchet.

The next day one of the King's lost and found managers went around asking who had dropped their hatchet. Many people said "no," and others tried to steal the hatchet. Once the manager got to Lumberella's house, Lumberella was the only one awake. The manager said with a groan in his voice, acting as if he had just run a marathon, "Is this your hatchet? I found it on the way home from the Lumberjack and Jill competition. I think it is the Lumberjill's first place winner's hatchet."

"I believe it is my hatchet," exclaimed Lumberella. "Thank you so much for finding it."

"You have a hatchet? You're only a servant girl," the manager said.

"So? Does it really look as if I am a servant? Let's try fitting the handle in my hand. Every handle is different, you know," exclaimed Lumberella.

The manager handed the hatchet over to Lumberella.

"Ew!" yelled Lumberella. "This hatchet is sticky and grimy, but because it is my hatchet I will wash it."

Lumberella washed up the hatchet with soap and a sponge. She then fitted the hatchet handle right in her hand. "It sits as if it is a pea in a pod," the manager said. "This must really be your hatchet. You will be rewarded with

becoming the Lumberjack prince's bride. Come with me, and you will marry the prince.”

A couple weeks later, a ceremony took place.

Lumberella was dressed in a long elegant white skirt with a red and black plaid blouse. The Lumberjack Prince was dressed in a blue shirt and black pants with suspenders that crawled up his back. As the music started to play, Lumberella and the prince walked down the aisle. People gasped and watched in awe as they strolled past. The Lumberpastor read from the Book of Timber Weddings. Lumberella and the prince said their vows and lived happily ever after.

**Elizabeth Gomez Monterroso
Worthington**

3rd Place

The White Castle in the Clouds

Chapter 1

Hi there, I will tell you the story of a magical place. Are you ready? Okay. Once there was a place called White Castle. It was a place where people were able to be who they wanted to be, like an artist, fairy, or anything that came to their minds. But to be who they want to be, they must go the White Castle. That's where they can be who they want to be.

Until one day, when everything changed.

Chapter 2

One day, someone didn't want to be who she wanted to be. She lied because her parents told her to be a doctor when she wanted to be a mermaid. Soon more parents started to tell their kids what they should be. That is how people started to lose all of their hopes and dreams, but there was a way to fix this.

Chapter 3

Once people started to be who they wanted to be, everything went back to normal. Except for one thing: there was no one to believe in their dreams. They listened to their parents now and made those dreams happen instead of their own. Soon the White Castle was forgotten, and only some people's dreams came true. The source of the energy came from their dreams. Everyone had given up except for one person, and that person was me. I'd make their dreams come true again.

Chapter 4

I had to find someone who still believed in who they want to be. The first thing I needed to do was to find White Castle. People said it was in the clouds. Maybe I could find someone there, but how could I get up there?

There is no way I can get there... unless I turn into a fairy and fly up there. I just need to believe.

(I turned into a fairy.)

Wow! I had no idea it was this beautiful up here, and I can see White Castle. My dream came true!

"Hello?

Anybody here?"

Chapter 5

A mysterious voice said, "Just me." She came out of the shadows, and she was a mermaid.

“Shouldn’t you be in the water?” I asked.

“No, I am a land and water mermaid,” she replied.

“What’s your name?”

“My name is Blossom. And yours?”

“My name is Iris,” I replied. “Blossom, can I ask you a favor? Would you help me restore the dreams of White Castle?”

“Sure, I will help you restore the dreams of White Castle. The place to start is the Pacific Ocean.”

Chapter 7

We were in the middle of the Pacific Ocean when we saw something glowing. Blossom dived down into the ocean. When she came out, she was holding a sphere with a fairy inside of it. That is when I realized that this is where all the dreams went when people didn’t believe in their dreams. We collected the rest of the dreams. We gave the dreams back to their believers and the parents started to support their children’s dreams.

Once again, the White Castle was a place where people could be who they wanted to be.

What’s your dream?

NONFICTION
Grades 5 & 6

**Bryce Metzger
Hills**

1st Place

Today I Overcome

I would like to tell you about a time that I got over my fear. It all started when my grandpa and grandma Teunissen got me a pass to swim with the dolphins at Discovery Cove in Florida as a Christmas gift. My first thought was I could not wait to go on vacation with my cousins, but we had to wait until March. I was really excited about going to Discovery Cove to swim with the dolphins and fish, but that all changed when we arrived there. I had never been close to a real life dolphin!

The time had come, and we were on our vacation. The day was finally here and I was ready to go to Discovery Cove! We started out by eating a delicious breakfast outside. After that we got fitted for our wetsuits and put on our sunscreen. I was starting to get a little nervous. My mom could tell because I was bouncing up and down and clenching my hands nervously. We all started out in the area where we could swim with different fish, stingrays, and sharks. It was so fun and interesting to see the fish up close that I forgot about being nervous. Just to let you know, I wasn't nervous for the sharks because we didn't actually get to swim with them—just near them with glass in-between.

When we got done swimming with the fish and drinking our slushies, Grandma said, “Who is ready to swim with the dolphins?”

I sure wasn't. On our way to meet with the trainer, we ran into a flamboyance of flamingos. They were so cool! We had to meet with the trainer to learn about some rules about swimming with the dolphins. I tried to talk my mom into not swimming with the dolphins, but it didn't work. She said, "It will be okay. I will be right there with you." My parents always say I need to try new things. As I walked away, I rolled my eyes and groaned.

The dolphin trainers announced it was finally our turn. At this time I would have rather sat on the beach with my brother and grandparents than go and touch a dolphin. The trainer taught us about each of the dolphins. We learned about their habits, behaviors, and how the trainers communicate with them. We also learned that our dolphin had a boyfriend and she would like to visit him. The trainer would blow her whistle to communicate with the dolphin. She would come by us and give us a splash to get to know us. Now it was time for us to get up close and personal with the dolphin. There were 10 of my family members in our group. The trainer asked, "Who wants to be first?"

"Not me," I said out loud, and backed away.

I was the last one to go in our group because I didn't want to do it. First, we each got a turn to pet the dolphin. When it was my turn, I slowly approached the dolphin and rubbed her fins. They were very smooth and rubbery. Then the next time the dolphin would swim up to us to give us a kiss. Disgusting! I eagerly backed away. When the dolphin swam over to me, I backed away. I don't think the dolphin could actually kiss me because I kept backing away. Then it was time when we were supposed to swim with the dolphins. Of course, I went last. All of my other family members went first, then it was my turn. I was so scared I wouldn't budge. Then I finally moved toward the dolphin and touched it. I was so scared I closed my eyes the whole time.

In a matter of time, it was over. It wasn't even that bad at all. Then I swam by my family and took pictures with the dolphin. The dolphin swam away and did cool tricks with the other dolphins. They did flips, dives, and juggled. They were the most amazing dolphins ever. I just wished I could have done it again. It was magical. I don't know why I was so nervous before.

We took a big family picture together. Then it was time to leave the dolphins. I was so sad that I asked my grandma to get the Discovery Cove passes again. We all said bye to the trainer and the dolphins. The dolphin waved as we headed out.

I learned that day by trying something new and exciting. You don't have to be anxious or worried. So the next time you want to try something new, you should, because it could be one of the best things that you have ever done in your life. That is how I overcame my fear of dolphins.

**Cassie Scandrett
Slayton**

2nd Place

Beaver Creek Buck

I feel my dad's strong hand touch my shoulder to wake me up. I sit up in bed with a jolt and realize something. Today's the day. Today's the day that I overcome my nervous feelings and decide something. I am going to shoot a deer.

I look at my clock. It is 5:30 a.m. and I know I have to get up. I look up at my dad and say good morning. We are going hunting today. We want to leave the house at 6:00 a.m. and start the half-mile hike.

I use all my force to push myself out of bed. I turn on my lamp so it's not too bright and I pick out my clothes. I slip on leggings and sweatpants over top of them, and I put on a T-shirt and sweatshirt. Long socks cover my shins on both legs. I pick up my pace and jog upstairs. Breakfast is a quick granola bar and cup of milk.

My dad lets me know it's time to go, so I swiftly put on my fall jacket. We grab the backpack filled with arrows, ratchet straps, and a buck knife. I put on the backpack and we head out into the chilly morning air.

On the long walk out, my dad and I are silent so we don't disrupt the peace and quiet. I have to take big steps to keep up with my dad's long stride. While I walk, I think of what the day will bring. Will I get a deer? Or will I come back disappointed like last time?

Suddenly, my dad holds up his hand, so I pause. He points to what looks like a tunnel of trees. I enter and it feels like walking into a whole new world. Instead of the tall, tan grass and weeds, I am enveloped in a world of trees: red, orange, and yellow. I step carefully to hinder the crunch of dead leaves underneath my feet. When my dad and I get to the v-shaped tree that he thinks will be easy to get into, I stop walking. Climbing the tree, my dad hangs the hanger stand up and straps it in as tight as possible. I will be in the stand that my dad just finished hanging, and he will be on the branch next to me. Acting as if it was a jungle gym, I scurry up the tree. I get situated and my dad puts a strap around me to prevent a fall that could happen if I wasn't careful. I still have room to wiggle a little if I need to adjust, though. With the crossbow in hand, I get positioned so I can shoot a deer from many angles.

I look at the forest around me. The sun is peeking up ever so slightly. It is breathtaking to see the light fill the woods. Everything appears with a deep golden color. I look at my dad. He is in the same trance as I am. All of a sudden, we hear a rustling. A medium-sized deer steps into view, completely unaware of the intruders in the tree. It trots closer and closer. My heart pounds in my chest and I'm surprised it doesn't burst right through. It all happens in five brief seconds. One... step. Two... step. Three... my dad whistles. Four... the deer stops ten yards in front of me. Five... I... pull... the trigger.

Time. Stands. Still.

Twang! The arrow hits the deer with a thud. The deer looks up, startled and alarmed. Within a second, the deer races away, jumping over anything that gets in its way. I, me, Cassie Scandrett, just shot a deer. My dad looks over at me and we start cheering! I feel excited beyond words. We wait about fifteen minutes and then carefully climb down

the tree. My dad immediately spots the blood trail to follow. First, I want to do something, though. I walk over to where the deer stood while I shot it. I think it's crazy that this is where it all happened. Just minutes ago, the deer was standing here giving me a great opportunity. I cherish the moment of looking at where my first deer was shot.

My dad tells me that we should start looking for the deer now, so I come over to him. He has a big grin on his face as we follow the blood trail. We walk about seventy yards and then stop. I look up at my dad and see that his expression is grim. We are at the end of the tree-enclosed area. He tells me that deer don't normally run much farther than this after being shot. A wave of guilt washes over me as I realize that I may have killed an animal without being able to use it, but then I realize something. The blood trail keeps going into the grassy area, so my dad and I do what we can: keep going.

Up ahead, I see an area of laid down grass. I try not to get my hopes up, but I can't help it. I'm on cloud nine. I sprint down to the spot and can't believe it. There, right in front of me, is my deer. My dad's smile has returned and he congratulates me. In total, this deer ran about one hundred yards, even though it was a perfect shot. I look down at this beautiful creature and can't believe what I see. Antlers! It's a buck! I was so focused on the shot that I didn't even notice that it had antlers.

Over excited, my dad takes about a gazillion pictures of me with the deer, the deer alone, and the deer and I from other angles. Once we finish the "photoshoot" my dad and I drag the deer back to the woods. It is too far to hike it all the way home, so we are going to field dress and quarter the buck here and pack it out. My dad always processes deer himself anyway, but he usually does it at home. I help pull the buck the best I can by tugging at a leg, but it feels as if

I'm not making much of a difference. I look up at my dad's determined face, and decide to try to help anyway. Once we manage to get the deer back to the forest and a little off the trail, my dad starts to field dress and quarter it with me by his side. It takes a while to butcher this deer because it has to lay on the ground while we do it, instead of hanging it up like we would do at home. The dried-up leaves stick to the meat like glue, so we know we'll have to thoroughly rinse it when we get home. My dad asks me to hold open the trash bag while he throws pieces of meat in. Finally, we finish, (or so I thought,) but then my dad flips over the deer to get the rest of the meat from the other side! Thankfully, this side goes much faster. When we get done, my dad's hands are coated in blood. My own small hands have a little blood on them, but they don't even compare to the amount covering my dad's hands. He suggests that we walk down to the Beaver Creek a few yards away to rinse off our disgusting hands. We get down by the edge of the water and I can't believe my eyes. The sun glints off the babbling stream. The sound of the rushing river flows in my ears. I look into the crystal-clear water at all the rocks, shells, and other delicate things on the bottom. As I gingerly put my hands in the water, an icy piercing shoots through my fingertips and reaches more of my hands. The water is coooold. I dunk the rest of my hands under and start scrubbing ferociously. My dad does the same. As the blood washes away, I watch my hands become their normal peachy pink color again.

Once my dad and I finish cleaning ourselves up best we can, we head back up the bank and to our spot. My dad brought an extra backpack to put the trash bags — now full of deer meat — in. I put on the red backpack with the hunting supplies in it, and my dad straps on the other backpack full of deer meat. He also takes the crossbow. We start the long hike home. When we get to the edge of the

trees I take one last look back. I face forward again and we keep walking. I can't even imagine how tiring it would be to carry two heavy things like my dad is. I can barely manage as it is, since the backpack straps are digging into my shoulders. On the strenuous hike back, I think about how successful the morning has been. I got my deer just as I hoped! I come to the understanding that it is good to try new things even if you're nervous about them. It can result in having a new hobby or something to look forward to.

I can't wait to tell my family about the adventure I've had today. I see my house in the distance and I start running, eager to tell my story.

Caroline Stoel
Lake Wilson

3rd Place

Mistakes

Mistakes, one of the worst things in the world. Even the tiniest mistake can ruin your life. Mistakes can snowball into a world of hurt, deceit, and lies. How might I know this? It all happened to me.

“How about we have lasagna tonight?” I hear my mom say, although her comment goes right past my head.

“Mac and cheese!” I yell.

“We could also have leftovers,” Mom says.

“No,” I say, “We’re having mac and cheese.”

Just then, Lauren walks in the room. “If you want, I can make her food, Mom,” she offers.

Mom raises her eyebrow, as if to question why.

“Please?” I ask in my nicest voice with my puppy dog eyes.

“After all, it is your birthday tomorrow,” my favorite sister says.

Mom unknits her eyebrows and sighs. “All right, but be careful,” she says, not knowing what’s to come.

Screams come from the kitchen.

Am I the only one who heard that? I think to myself as I run out the door.

Lauren’s collapsed on the ground, wincing at the blinding pain. My older brother is at her side. “Caroline,” Lauren says, “go get Mom.”

I run to Mom's room. "What happened?" she asks, her heart beating fast.

"I don't know," I admit, "but Lauren's on the ground."

Mom jumps to her feet and rushes out the door. She then moves Lauren to a cold bath, hoping to soothe her pain. When that doesn't work, Mom makes a call. On her phone, I see the numbers 911. All of the sudden, the world stops.

Was it all my fault? I mean, I was the one who wanted mac and cheese, not Lauren. Now she will need surgery, and she might not be out of the hospital by Christmas. I can feel the tears forming as we pass through the halls.

"Logan!" My father's strong voice pulls me out of my trance. "Stop admiring the candy bars. Your sister is hurt!"

My brother Logan's eyes drop, and in that moment, I can tell that he realizes. He realizes that Lauren is hurt, that Lauren won't be the same, that Lauren is in a tremendous amount of pain, that Lauren is broken.

"Just like a china doll," the nurse tells us. "So be very careful."

"What happens if we aren't careful?" Logan asks the nurse.

"Something bad," she answers.

I make a mental note to be extra careful.

"Lauren is just at the end of the hallway," Lauren's nurse says.

I count the steps as we move along. One. I force myself to keep moving. Two. Left, right, left, right. Three. We're less than two steps away from her. Four. One more step, I tell myself. Five. I freeze.

Beeps and clunks come out of the machine Lauren's attached to. It has a moving hill and lots of numbers, but I

don't know what they mean. My heart sinks. I should be the one in that bed, hooked up to a bag and loud machine, suffering.

"Hi." Lauren croaks. I'm afraid to go up to her.

What if she won't recover? What if I hurt her more? All of these what-ifs run through my head. I'm forced to hug her, but I can tell she knows that I'm scared.

"It's okay, Caroline," she says. "I'm just fine." She is definitely not fine.

So, as I said before, mistakes.

Mistakes can create hurt, deceit, and lies. But there's something about mistakes that people don't tell you. The result. Mistakes can make people better, stronger. The mistake made Lauren stronger, and she eventually made a full recovery.

POETRY
Grades 7 & 8

**Lexie Overvaag
Luverne**

1st Place

Angel

rain
the sky
is crying
my hair
and clothes
soaked through
my cold skin
shivering
then
feathers,
warmth
wings over
me, blocking
the rain,
the tears
of the sky
take me
under your
wings,
as i
huddle against
your warmth
take me in
wrap your
wings around
me
as the rain
continues its weeping
for we

do not
make a difference
as two small
people
in a
monstrous
world

Vera Prouty
Edgerton

2nd Place

Doodling Poem

I love my doodling
 A fact that ain't tough
 But my hand can go crazy
 Drawing all sorts of stuff.

Today's an example
 during science class
 At friction I was drooling
 And my hand couldn't pass.

I doodled all over
 My paper was full
 But my hand wasn't tired
 And my pencil not dull.

To settle my greed
 I did the unthought
 I drew on the desk
 All over my spot!

My teacher now noticed
 She wasn't impressed
 But I drew on her
 So she was done with *this* pest.

My fingers weren't done, though,
 They weren't satisfied.
 But maybe my class was
 'Cause quickly they cried:

“Stop this at once!
You cannot keep this up!”
But my pencil came ‘round
And doodled them up.

Now my pencil was ready
To really have fun
Lead all over the walls
I had doodled a ton!

My classroom was totaled
With drawings throughout.
But my principal was ready
And he wasn’t backing out.

My hand came at him
With doodles cranked high
But he had doodler’s bane
An eraser, and he let fly.

That couldn’t stop me
So he drowned in lead
I conquered my school
And onward I sped.

My empire grew
Bigger every day
Boredom unknown
My doodles made it pay.

I took over town
All my doodles were seen
I doodled the continent
And I was its queen.

No one could stop me
I traveled overseas
Taking ALL the continents
My pencil was pleased.

I had doodled everywhere
On all things possible
My hand was done
My greed was full.

My doodles were famous
On drawings I soared
But without space to doodle
It had come. I was bored!

Laylana Hoffmann
Sleepy Eye

3rd Place

Growing Up

Growing up is cool
 One day you're off splashing in a pool
 The next you're watching little ones do the same
 The old things seem lame
 Seeing yourself grow
 Enjoy looking through that window
 Soon you'll have to grab the wheel
 We stand on our heel
 But tippy toes were the only way to see
 Who will I be?
 Only time can tell
 The familiar smell
 Reminds me of times when my biggest problems
 Would be pointless now
 It all seems noiseless now
 Not quite calm
 Soon I'll move on to prom
 I'll never stop growing
 And I'll keep showing
 How you're never quite the same
 But you're not to blame
 We all go through stages
 We all go through changes
 Just remember how little you once were
 Before it's all a blur

FICTION
Grades 7 & 8

Lexie Overvaag
Luverne

1st Place

My Honey

The dark night sky looms far above, brightened only by faint, sparkling stars and a luminescent, aurelius half-moon. The deep, lonely forests of my domain tremble in the rough, harsh wind as I prowls through the shadows. Favoring the darkness, I leave blatant, deep tracks in the freshly fallen snow. I have nothing to fear. The only treacherous thing worth fearing in these woods is me. Raising my head high, I inhale deeply, catching a variety of scents.

Tonight, the only intruders are stray rabbits and a renegade raccoon. Nothing too worrisome, though the faint aroma of badger is a bit troubling. The problem with badgers is that they're so stupidly brave that they don't know to back off when a wolf bares its teeth at them. Ah, well. If they still linger by moon-high, they'll learn their lesson the hard way.

I had hoped for a little fun tonight.

After marking the eastern border of my territory, I slink northwards, creeping beneath the protective boughs of evergreens. Every breath brings more snow, sprinkling down upon me and flecking my thick coat. I look behind me to see that my tracks are almost completely covered over already. Once I finish with the northern border, I plan to retreat to my den to wait out the coming storm. No sane animal would hunt in this weather. Except maybe a badger. As I mentioned previously, badgers are fearless. Idiots.

I spot a rabbit upwind, nibbling at a stray blade of grass poking up through the snow beneath a pine tree. The wind shifts suddenly and I see the fear enter the rabbit's giant ebony eyes, smell it shoot into her bloodstream, feel it inject itself into the air. I lift my lips in a snarling smile and prowl forward.

The rabbit, petrified, stares at me in dumb horror, unable to move. I grin at her and let out a sharp bark, baring my fangs. The rabbit is shocked out of her frozen stupor and swivels, bounding away as fast as she can. Her powerful hind legs spray dove-white powder into my face as she vanishes into the dense undergrowth.

Now that the straggler is gone, I drop the act and shake my head, removing the dusting of snow from my face. The rabbit will return to her family tonight. I know the importance of prey animals such as her. Without them, along with mice, voles, and shrews, my life as I know it would crumble. Even the smallest creature has a place in my kingdom. But that doesn't mean I won't have a little fun with a hare when I come across it. The snowfall has thickened, the wind has become fiercer. I don't have much time. I pick up the pace, loping through the drifts until I reach the northern border. On the other side, I smell the jagged scent of Bluff, the opposing leader of the wolf pack across the river. I let loose a soft growl, my hackles rising. I spot the muscular gray wolf's outline at the top of a sloping hill across the river.

Another wolf appears by his side, and I relax at the sight of Moonglow, Bluff's daughter. I breathe in again, taking in the scent of the young she-wolf. Based on her behavior recently, she will probably be open to being my mate this year, when spring comes. When spring comes, thawing frozen streams and frigid hearts, tenderly lifting soft, young blossoms from beneath their cozy blanket of

frost, and clothing bare trees with viridian leaves and vibrant flowers. When spring brings the forest to life, and in doing so, awakens adolescent hearts to the love one can find in another.

That would be...good. I have spent a long time being alone, and maybe it's time for a change.

After all, a wolf isn't supposed to be alone.

No one is.

I greet Moonglow with a short howl, which she returns. Then I turn tail and bound through the snow back towards my den, checking the wind all the time. The badger scent has faded, indicating that the trespasser has exited my territory. Pity. I had hoped to have some fun, chasing it away. Badgers are always amusing, but they can get extremely annoying to chase all the time. It's simply a badger's nature to be severely obnoxious.

Then I smell something else.

It is sweet, smooth, and gentle, like honey. There is also the bitter taste of fear, and the sting of pain. The fear overpowers the others suddenly, and I recognize the scent of moose. Someone, or something, is in trouble, and I'm fairly sure it's the moose's fault. Moose have a tendency of being troublesome.

I have no idea why, but I turn towards the honey-smell and sprint in that direction. Carried on the wind, a shrill scream echoes through the snow-blurred air. I run faster. Finally, I skid to a stop, my gaze landing on the bulky brown shape of a moose. The arrogant, over-exaggerated rack on the top of its head is impossible to miss.

With a sigh, I push on. I really hate moose.

The moose bellows and stomps his gigantic hooves, snorting furiously. I release a fierce, lilting howl and lunge forwards, snapping at the bull's spindly hind legs. He roars and stumbles backwards, kicking out at me. I dodge the

flailing hooves expertly and clamp my jaws closed on his foreleg. My fangs sink into his thick, wooly brown fur. Teeth crack against bone, and he moos in pain, staggering away from me on three legs.

I hang on, gritting my teeth and firming my paws, snarling all the while. Finally, just as the bull prepares to go all out, I release and prance around to the other side. Quick as lightning, I go for the throat. A spray of crimson wets the snow and my face, and the bull falls away, tripping into the distance. As his shape fades away into the blinding storm of white, I turn to the victim of the moose's temper tantrum. A small figure is huddled in the snow, scarlet streaming from its leg. The moose must have nicked it with his hoof. One whiff tells me that this is where the honey-smell was coming from. Another informs me that this is a female human pup, and she is scared.

Scared of me?

Normally, I would agree that yes, she should be scared of me. But this is a pup. And her paw is hurt. I creep closer and whine reassuringly, sniffing at her leg. She flinches and yanks her leg to her chest, then cries out in pain. I glance around quickly. Something tells me that this place is dangerous. She has chosen the wrong tree to lick her wounds beneath. I whine again and prowl towards her. She can't run away, not in this state, and she's harmless; that much I can tell. I make eye contact, staring into her soft brown eyes, both of which reflect fear and pain. And I see my own face in her gaze, my rime-gray fur and my ice blue eyes.

I can only hope that my own eyes convey the compassion and sympathy I feel right now, staring into her round, pink face framed by a mane of golden-brown hair. I touch my nose to her face and lick her cheek once. Her skin is salty from tears. Seeming to grasp my good-nature and friendly demeanor, she laughs softly, a sound interrupted by

hesitant sobs. The-pup-who-smells-like-honey reaches out a hand and grazes it against my thick collar fur. I pant and lean into her touch, hoping that she imagines me to be harmless, too.

Gently, I nudge my head under her hand and push her to her feet. When she puts weight on her injured leg, she cries out softly, more tears flowing down her cheeks. I quickly lead her away, and just in time. As she hops on one foot through the deep snow, cringing with every step, the tree beneath which she had been seeking shelter groans in warning and pain. She screams as a titanic tree branch comes toppling down with a crack. I leap in front of her to shield her from the stinging fountain of ice crystals caused by the limb. The snowflakes are speckled all over my coat as I guide Honey into a small, dense copse, where she lays down on a drift with a crunch. Outside the safety of our shelter, the wind howls, and the night sky is completely hidden by swirling snow.

Propped up against the trunk of a conifer, Honey gasps for breath, quivering violently. I paw at her leg, brushing the snow off. In a rip in her pants, there was a bloody gash surrounded by vivid crimson bruises. Keeping an eye on her reaction, I lean down and lick the wound carefully. There is a sharp intake of breath, and her face turns absolutely white. More tears overflow, spilling down her face in little rivers.

Whining softly, I continue to wash the wound tenderly. She winces and cringes again and again, pain twisting her delicate features. She clutches the ruff on the back of my neck and weeps bitterly. It must feel excruciating, but I must clean the wound. Once again, I pledge my hatred of moose.

Giving the gash one last stroke of the tongue, I sit back and observe her carefully. She now shivers harder than

before. The chill is obviously taking over her body. I crawl on top of her and lay my jaw on her shoulder. Burying her face in my ruff, she combs my warm fur with her shaking red fingers. Gradually, my body heat seems to comfort and warm her, and she drifts into a light, restless sleep. Her brow remains crumpled as she exhales quietly into my fur.

I eventually close my own eyes and allow myself to slumber, but I will awaken at the slightest sound or scent of danger. In this way, we lay together until dawn, waiting out the vengeful blizzard. When the first glow of sunlight rises on the horizon, I lift my head and wag my tail eagerly.

At the sound of my tail beating the hardened snow, Honey lifts her head from my neck and gazes around dazedly. Her dark brown eyes sparkle in the sunlight, and she flutters her long wet lashes as she sits up. A tentative, relieved smile lights up her sweet face.

“Morning,” she whispers, stroking my head softly. Then she looks down at me and blinks in surprise.

“You're still here?” I whimper and lick her cold, salty cheek.

“You didn't leave me,” she finally sighs, wrapping both arms around me and kissing my ears. I wag my tail again and stand, sending a blanket of frost tumbling onto Honey's legs.

She sits up further, more snow falling from her rumpled coat. She wipes the soft flakes from her injured leg and studies the wound.

“I think I can walk,” she mutters to herself, struggling to her feet. When her wounded leg gives out beneath her, I lunge to her side. Using me to brace herself, Honey limps into the open, and we both leave behind tracks; mine immaculate paw prints, hers blurred footsteps that streak into one another, the left deeper than the right.

Once in the open meadow, which is unrecognizable in the glistening disguise of winter, she collapses again, exhausted from the short trek, and quivering from the cold once more. She hugs her reddened, bare fingers to her chest and exhales heavily.

“How am I going to get out of here, buddy?” She pauses. “I should really start calling you something, shouldn’t I?”

Honey looks up at the gradually lightening horizon. Her gaze travels to the point straight above her. “How about Zenith?”

I have no idea what she’s talking about. I lip her hand gently and let out a sharp yip. We need to keep moving. She seems to get the message, and begins to limp again. As I guide her toward my den, she continues rambling.

“Astronomically, the zenith is the point right above you in the sky. But zenith also means a high point in your life, or of anything you’ve done. For instance, my father’s zenith is his newest discovery: an exoplanet. I should tell him to name it ‘Zenith’—I think he would be open to it, considering you saved my life.” Honey hesitates and gnaws at her lip. “If I get home.”

After pausing briefly to nuzzle her hand, I press on through the field of pure white. Finally, after scaring away a couple of rabbits, a fox, and a raccoon, we reach my den, and I leave her curled up in the back corner while I hunt. Luckily, a hare gets a little too curious near the den, and I catch him easily. I don’t normally hunt hares, but then again, since coming across Honey, what have I done normally? Proud of my kill, I carry the prey back to Honey and drop it at her feet. She stares at it disdainfully.

“...Thanks, Zenith,” she finally says, patting my head and smiling fondly at me. I sniff her hand and lick, then prance away to catch something for myself. I may not have

had a pack for a long time, but one rule is universal among wolves: the young, sick, and injured always eat first. And Honey is two out of those three.

When I return, licking my chops free of moose blood (let's just say that the bull who I injured while protecting Honey didn't last long with his throat torn open), I find Honey on her knees just outside the den. Before her, on a patch of thin snow, is a small, hot fire. Instinctively, I growl at the flames, bristling.

Honey laughs and beckons me closer. "It's okay, Zenith. It's just a campfire."

I whine gently and cautiously make my way to her side, going wide around the blaze. Once I reach her side, I lay down beside her, curling my body around her. I don't want her to get cold again. Although the dancing fire, which is spitting sparks uncomfortably close to my tail, will probably keep Honey toasty, I don't want to take any chances.

Honey slides the hare I had caught for her onto a long stick and places it over the fire. I notice that she has removed the fur off of the rabbit, and the skin is hanging up to dry on a tree limb. The ways of humans never cease to amaze me. Slowly turning the stick, Honey watches the rabbit carefully, and eventually removes it.

With a rueful grimace, she licks her lips. "Bon appetit," she offers with a wry smile.

Once she is finished with her meal, we retreat back to the den, where she curls up, exhausted, against me. Her long, dark lashes flutter shut, and she snuggles up in my fur. I look down at her in curiosity. She is strange to me; foreign, if you will. Most humans I meet are males, and they usually have guns. I am not intimidated by them, for I am far more cunning than they can imagine.

But Honey is different.

She's my Honey.

Letting out a yawn, I lay my head down beside her hand. Just as my eyes blink closed, a sharp sound forces me out of my sleepy state. I jerk my head up and eye the entrance to my cave. A silhouette catches my gaze. I sense another human; this one an adult male. I smell his fear, as I have smelled so many times before. But this time is different. Intermingling with the fear and worry are anger and reckless... love.

“Sarah!” the man calls out, unaware that he has just stumbled upon the den of an overprotective lone wolf. “Sarah, are you out here?!” At the sound of his voice, Honey moans and shifts. The shadow starts, then grows as he approaches.

“Sarah?” he says again, growing excited. I growl softly as he steps inside my cavern. A single shaft of sunlight falls across his tan face etched with worry lines. The rest of my den is heavily shadowed, but my gray fur stands out against the tan dirt on the stone floor. I can tell the moment his gaze lands on me. His eyes go wide and he stumbles back a step, then squints when he sees Honey beneath me. His eyes narrow and he steps forward, fists clenched at his side. Everything about his posture says “Aggression.” Most other wolves would have fled.

But I am not most wolves.

Slowly, I slip away from Honey's sleeping form and prowl forward. Back arched, teeth bared, ears forward, tail high, and fur bristled, I snarl, every inch of my body returning his message. Slinking toward him another step, I let out a sharp, loud bark that warns, “Back off.” Reaching back, the man retrieves a small, black, angular object. My senses all scream the same thing: Danger. I've only seen rifles before, but the bitter tang of gunpowder coating my throat tells me the truth.

As I snarl again, Honey jerks awake behind me. “Zenith?” she mutters sleepily. Then she sees the man. “Daddy!”

“Sarah!” the man cries, his voice flooded with relief. “Don't worry baby, I'll get you out of he—”

Without warning, Honey lunges to her feet and limps to his side, throwing her arms around him. “It's okay, Daddy! It was the most amazing thing—this wolf, he saved me!”

As Honey spills out her story, the man's cold, alert eyes, though struggling to remain on me, eventually give in and focus on his daughter. The cold in his eyes melts as he stares at his pup. I recognize the similar scents now. Beneath the man's bitter gun-smell, there is the same sweetness, though his is also layered by the fresh aroma of the mountain wind. They are sire and pup.

They are family and they have now been reunited. My work here is done. Silently, I creep around them, creating a wide arc, and escape into the open air. My paws pump through the snow in the familiar, comforting rhythm I love so much. Gradually, I calm, and slow to a halt atop a snow drift. I gaze down at my cave, where Honey is bursting out, cheeks flushed as she searches for me. Her warm brown eyes light up when they land on me. Her brow furrows when she realizes that I left her there. And her lips move silently as she tells me something I can't hear or understand.

I let out a loud yip, and bark once. She is home now. She doesn't need me any longer. Understanding fills her reflective gaze, and firming her jaw, she nods once. Then, tilting her head back so that her tangled copper-colored hair spills over her shoulders, she lets loose a wild lilting howl. When she finishes, I meet her gaze and throw my head back to return the favor.

I sing a song of loss, of loneliness and fear. Then the melody shifts to the joy of rescue and the thrill of the hunt.

And then it is transformed by the awesome terror of the storm, and finally ends with love. The love connecting two hearts; the heart of a lonely wolf king, and the heart of a young human pup with a heart of gold and eyes like honey.

And I am finished.

As I bound through the snow-dusted wood, sunlight streaming down and warming my thick coat, I wonder if Honey has changed me, for I will never be the same again. Because I have never seen so much innocence, joy, and peace before in my life than in her honey-brown eyes. And I have left her behind. I think to myself, as I race through the forest, transformed by the enchanting magic of winter, that there has never been such sweetness as that of my pup. My pup, Honey.

**Vera Prouty
Edgerton**

2nd Place

Glass on the Floor

The key was under my mattress. That was the single fact that kept me sane here.

My mattress was on my cot, and that was in my cell, naturally. My wrists and ankles were chained, and two guards stood at the end of the hall. They switched watch every four hours.

I fiddled with my long hair, shorter than it used to be, but longer than I liked it, though Mother never used to let me cut my own hair so that it could be the length that I preferred. She did it for me, on the rare occasions I let down my lengthy tangle for her to come check on me. I mourned those days, when my hair was so extensive, I could tie myself up with it.

Now I wished I hadn't spent so much time carefully winding the blonde knots around myself, for now I was tied, but I could not undo them, as I so easily could in the tower...

Perhaps I wasn't as sane as I was hoping.

The key. The mattress, my mind urged. It urged me to hold on to my shattered conscience, the pieces of glass crackling under my feet. I could still hear the smash of my sanity cracking as my mind replayed the sound of the verdict:

A life sentence.

I was sure I could write a sentence about life, but when I had asked the guards if I could, they had only frowned and denied me pen and paper.

If only.

Two men had come to my cell a few days before this one and had asked if they could write a story about me. I had told them a fantasy I have warped into what I now think of as the past, and all they had asked me after I had finished recounting my tale was my name. I wasn't fond of my name at the time, so I told them the silliest pseudonym I could think of:

Rapunzel.

The two men had looked at each other but said nothing. The one on the left had bowed mockingly and said, "The Brothers Grimm, thank you for your cooperation to share your peculiar narrative." He had lost his balance and slipped, grabbing my cell's bars for stability. His hand dropped something into my lap, regained his balance, and left.

The object in my lap had been a key.

I picked at the glass shards in my feet. I knew the shards weren't actually there, but sometimes my mind wandered, and I could almost remember the crack as my conscience dissolved into...

Well, glass.

And then, the pieces would feel all the more existent.

The key. Sometimes all I wanted was for whatever was left up there to float away and join the rest of the glass on the floor, so that I could live out the rest of my days in nothing. I suppose I wasn't totally insane yet. Yet. Yet?

"Yet. Yet, yet, yet." I said the word out loud. It sounded funny after repeating it over and over again.

A guard walked over to my cell and shoved a can and a spoon through the bars. I knew the can contained beans. I

used to like beans, back in my tower, but now they tasted just as good as the glass on the floor.

I stood to grab them, and upon walking back to my cot, I stubbed my toe on a particularly large shard. I cried out, and I yelled, for the thirty-fourth time (my mind had set itself upon keeping track) since I had arrived here, “Will someone clean this up?”

The first few times, the guards had actually come and inspected the floor of my cell, but now they knew there wasn’t anything there. Even I knew that, but some days when my mind slipped away into the void of insanity, I feel the crack as they dug into my feet, and my feet would bleed...

Today was one of those times again.

I threw the beans down my throat, hunger always gnawing on me, trying to gain purchase on my skinny body. A doctor visited me once every year, and every time she told the guards they needed to feed me more, lest I get a funny thing called malnutrition. It sounded like an odd disease, and I wondered if it had a cure. I wasn’t sure if it even was a disease, or if the doctor had been making up words, as I used to in order to impress Mother.

The guards would listen, as if they cared, and then they would go report to someone in higher authority, but they would never actually do what the doctor said. Beans would be my last meal, unless I escaped.

Escaped with the key.

The key was under my mattress. My mattress was on my cot, and that was in my cell, naturally...

I snapped my fingers, an odd little movement I had mastered over the last three years. I could snap with every finger, and doing so often summoned my mind back from the void it so often vacationed to.

I had waited long enough to do this, but I had forced myself to so that when the day came, my mind would be back from the void, and I often thought the best when it was freshly summoned.

I took the key out from under the mattress and tried shoving it into my ankle locks. It wouldn't fit into it, so I shoved the handle of the spoon into it. It was just skinny enough that it would fit, and I wriggled it around inside, and—

Click. I had never expected the sound of freedom to be so bland.

I was going to do the same for my wrist bonds, but I decided to leave them on. If the guards would see my unbound hands for what I was about to do, they would have rushed to my cell before I could execute my plan.

Execute. I decided I would never use that word once I was free.

If I could manage to get free. There were many possibilities for my plan to fail.

I grabbed the empty bean can and stuck my head out of a hole in the bars. I took aim and threw the can directly between the two guards. I had been practicing throwing with my other bean cans from past days in my cell, until my aim had been perfected. Both guards looked at the can, and in that split second, I unlocked the door and sprinted out of the exit opposite of the guards.

The guards ran after me, yelling down the hallways for reinforcements. I could hear the stomping of boots thumping louder and louder in my ears.

I turned down corridors blindly, following only where my feet desired to go. I passed a sign that pointed back where I came, labeled: PSYCH. CONFINEMENT.

My shackles bounced and jingled as I pumped my arms as far as they would allow me. I wished I had unlocked my hands as well.

My lungs heaved as much air into them as I could manage; I hadn't had physical exertion like this in three years. Already I could feel my legs start to give out, and I knew I was paying the price for beans as my long-time supplier of nutrition.

Curious prisoners peeked through their filthy bars to observe the commotion, and some cheered me on.

My hair whipped and lashed as I ran down the halls. My feet stung where unseen glass shards sat, embedded into them...

I told myself that when I was free, I would see a doctor about removing them.

These thoughts raced through my head as I stumbled and caught myself on a barred door. I looked down the hallway, and on the right, I saw light, flickering in through a window.

The sun! I had never felt the sun on my limbs, even in my tower, except for walking to this prison three years ago. The memory urging my aching feet and limbs onward, as if to say, only ten steps to freedom! Eight, five, two...

I burst through the door and found myself pounding into the light, not on the greenest grass towards a cozy cottage, but on concrete, towards a chain link fence...

I screamed in determination as I jumped up onto the fence and scrambled up. Against my feet's protests, I shoved my feet into the holes and clambered... until...

A guard grabbed me and ripped me off of the fence. I screamed and clawed at his face. He flinched, then grabbed my chains and yanked them down into his hands. He hoisted me over his shoulder and hauled me back inside.

The sun. I needed the sun.

I ripped my chains out of his grasp and hit him over the head as hard as I could with the metal wrist bond connecting my hands. The guard stumbled.

More guards had gathered, but they hadn't surrounded the door yet. I jumped out of the guard's hold and raced back towards it, and pushed it open and-

The sun. Again. It felt even better than the first time.

I spotted a door on the right of the fence. I ran towards it, needing to escape.

I threw myself at the door, but it was locked. I banged on it, crying and screaming, "No! No! No!"

The guard tried pulling me onto him again, but I wouldn't. I wouldn't go back. "NO!"

I remembered the glass on my floor, how it sat shattered on my floor...

Shattered.

I lifted my shackled hands above my head and brought the metal down on the doorknob. The lock shattered.

I pushed the guard off of me and opened the door. More guards surrounded this door, and I tried ripping through them. One grabbed my hand chains. "No! Stop! I can't go back!" Another fastened chains to my feet. I screamed and tried ripping my hands away, but the guards held fast.

I felt a sharp prick in my neck, and I went unconscious.

I awoke, not in my cell, but in a different one. This one smelled different, and the walls weren't as worn as mine were.

I stood and tried to walk towards the cell door, but a tug on my wrists stopped me. I twisted around to look, and I saw that my wrists were chained to the wall.

I panicked. I pulled as hard as I could, but to no avail. I couldn't see out of my cell; couldn't even move to grab food, or water, or a spoon, or a key handed through the bars...

The key. The key was under my mattress. My mattress was on my cot, and that was in my cell, naturally...

Not anymore. There was no key under my mattress now.

I slumped back down onto my cot and leaned against the wall. When I laid my head against the cool stone, I could see the floor.

The floor was covered with shattered glass.

Lexie Overvaag
Luverne

3rd Place

not quite my dad

It happens like clockwork every time.

Sometimes, late at night, I lay awake in bed, unable to sleep. I stand, leaving my husband snug beneath the comforter, and make my way over to the window. Silently, I swing open the window and breathe in the night air. Crickets chirp outside. The moonlight dances on the black water of Lake Superior, more like a freshwater ocean than the reservoir it is. I stare into the indigo shadows. Slowly, my gaze shifts to the cluster of trees where I know that a small girl by the name of Lavinia Terrace resides.

Then the crickets fall silent. The wind dies instantly. The surface of the lake quivers. And I know what is coming.

It starts in my collarbone, then swells within my chest until it's rattling my skeleton. I can't move. I remain frozen, leaning out of the window in my nightdress, my hands trembling. The sound finally becomes audible and rips across the lake in a scream that I can't describe. My blood is ice, my eyes blurry, my mouth dry.

And just as quickly as it began, it is gone. Returning to the thing from whence it came. The stunned night waits, its soundtrack muted until it recovers from its shock. The crickets stammer out their song once more, the wind whistles past again, and the ripples on the lake return to their natural rhythm. As if nothing has happened. But my heart continues

to thunder. There's something out there. Even if nothing else will admit it, I know.

Something is out there.

I stride down the hall, panic rising in my throat, and peek into the two other bedrooms. Inside the room painted pastel purple, Sofia is snuggled in the bottom bunk, April in the top. One room over, Stephen hugs the stuffed donkey he's had since he was a baby. And in the new toddler bed, Beckett has kicked off his blanket and is wriggling like a little worm. I let out a sigh, lean down, and kiss his shallow forehead. Then I turn to Stephen, and do the same. Return to the girls and kiss each of them.

They're safe. But I can't shake the feeling that we're being watched.

And yet, I simply return to bed. I lay down under the covers and watch my husband's even breaths. His chest rises and falls in a calm, sedate rhythm, sure and unconcerned. He wasn't stirred. He never is.

After all, I am the only one who hears It.

The only way I am able to settle my leaping heart is by feeling Spencer's pulse. My hand rests on his neck, my palm covering up part of his tattoo, my wedding ring gleaming in the moonlight. And I fall into a deep sleep.

This is not the first time this has happened. The next morning, I always wake up scared stiff. Petrified. Frozen in fear. Finally, I had enough. I didn't go back to sleep. I remained awake, settling into bed beside Spencer and reading my Bible. When dawn filtered in through the curtains, I turned off the lamp and got ready for the day. I was determined that today, I would find out what 'It' was. That was the worst decision of my life.

When Spencer stumbled downstairs several hours later, his dark hair spiked and messy, I was sitting at the breakfast bar, stirring cream into my coffee. "Morning,

Holly,” Spencer mumbled, managing a kiss intended for my lips, but landing near my temple instead.

“Good morning.” I kissed his cheek and ran a hand through his hair. He needed to shave, I noted. He wandered over to the coffee maker and poured himself a cup, sending the bitter aroma wafting through the air. “How’d you sleep?” I asked like I always do.

“Really well,” he answered as he always does when I ask.

I stood and began to fix the misaligned buttons on his shirt while giving him the schedule for the day. “I’m taking the kids to the aquarium in the morning. After that, I have to stop by work for a few hours. Then we have our date tonight.”

“Can’t wait.” He kissed me, hitting the target this time. “Have fun at the aquarium. You’ll have to tell me all about it.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Sofia will talk your ear off.” I fondly touched a drawing on the fridge. “She’s obsessed with sharks right now.”

“I know. She asked me if we could get a pet megalodon yesterday.” Spencer sipped from his mug, closing his eyes in satisfaction.

“What did you say?”

My husband grinned and shrugged. “I told her to ask you about it.”

By the time all four kids were awake, dressed, and fed, it was time to go. I loaded them up in the Expedition and headed toward the aquarium. As we passed the lake and started into the more wooded area, Beckett babbled in his car seat and pointed out the window.

“Wuff!” he cried in delight.

“What?” Sofia demanded, her twin braids swinging. “Those aren’t wolf tracks, Beck! Those are deer tracks!”

“That’s one big deer,” twelve-year-old April reasoned. “Is it moose?”

From the front seat, Stephen pulled down his headphones and peered out the window. “That’s big even for a moose.” My hands began to shake. I pulled over and sat for a moment, willing my pulse to calm down.

“Mom?” Stephen asked quietly, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Of course,” I lied, my voice cracking. “It’s a nature study opportunity. Come on, kiddos. Let’s take a peek.” I opened my door and stepped out.

Reluctantly, Stephen undid his seatbelt and climbed out. “Sofia, can you grab the nature journals?”

“Why me?!” Sofia demanded, folding her arms over her chest. “I don’t wanna – ”

“I’ll get them,” April interrupted, reaching into the tote bag at Sofia’s feet.

Once I had Beckett out of his car seat, we trudged behind the car. “Where did you say the tracks were?” I asked April.

She led the way, walking gracefully, her light brown hair straight and smooth down her back. “They were further away than I thought, I guess.” Finally, she stopped and stood stock-still. “Oh,” she whispered.

Sofia grabbed my hand and hid her face in my shirt. Beckett laughed and sat down in the dried mud. Stephen whistled. We were in front of the twisting gravel path leading upward toward a small cabin.

The track, the shape of a moose print, was bigger than my head.

After I dropped the kids off at home with their father, I headed into the office. There was a particular case that the agency wanted me to look into. I opened the folder at my desk and flipped through the pages. When my gaze landed

on the address, my blood ran cold. The twelve-year-old girl I was supposed to investigate lived in the cabin at the top of the gravel path. The very path in which the giant print was carved. I leaned back in my chair and sipped my chamomile tea, trying to calm my pounding heart. Well. There was no dwelling on it. I stood and grabbed my keys. I was going to pay a visit to this Lavinia Terrace.

As my SUV climbed the steep driveway, I scanned the rough ground outside. Shivers spiked up my spine when I spotted staggered pairs of the same tracks. What exactly was lurking around this house? When I reached the top, I climbed out, strode up to the door, and knocked. No one replied, so I turned around and began to investigate.

The cabin was small and rustic, not at all run-down. It seemed sturdy and safe enough. I glanced around the porch and noticed something white hidden behind a swinging bench. I knelt down and pushed the swing gently out of the way. An antler, similar to a stag's, was lying on the wood. I touched the base, the end that would have been attached to the deer's head. My fingers came away covered in red dust.

By the time I was turning onto the highway, my mind was racing. What was going on here? A young girl was walking down the side of the road, fingers hooked on the straps of her backpack. A quick glance at her face confirmed her to be Lavinia Terrace. I pulled over and waved to her as I approached.

"My name is Holly Stone," I told her as I fell in step beside her.

"Hi," she greeted warmly, pushing her golden-brown hair out of her face. "I'm Lavinia."

"I work with Good Shepherd," I explained, flashing a reassuring smile. "The child welfare agency in town."

"I know," Lavinia said with a confused grin and an arched eyebrow. "Why do you need to talk to me?"

“There have been some... questions,” I continued, choosing my words carefully. “No one has seen you in town with a parent, an adult, or even an older brother or sister. We’re just trying to make sure you’re safe, happy, and fed.”

“Don’t worry,” she assured me. “I’m all three. I’m completely taken care of.” With a sunny laugh, Lavinia shrugged and added, “Maybe a little too well. I know it’s for my own good, but that overprotectiveness can be a bit overbearing, you know?”

“Who takes care of you?” I pressed on gently.

“Alvin,” Lavinia replied without a moment of hesitation.

When she didn’t clarify further, I asked, “...Is Alvin your uncle, or brother? Cousin?” A girl wouldn’t call her father by his first name, would she? “...Your dad?”

“Well...” She trailed off thoughtfully, raising her lightly freckled nose to the evening air. Her voice remained as cheerful and chipper as ever. “He’s not quite my dad. But I think maybe he used to be.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. “I-I see,” I stammered, turning slightly. Something in my gut told me to get out. Now. “Do you suppose I could meet with... Alvin one of these days?”

Lavinia tilted her head, deep in thought. “I suppose,” she drew out. “It would be a bit of a hassle, with me having to translate and all. I’ll talk to him next time I see him.” With a sweet smile, Lavinia waved at me and jogged up her driveway. “Bye, Miss Holly! Nice to meet you!”

I watched her go and finally turned the Expedition back around and headed home, still chewing on all she had said. Alvin, huh? He maybe used to be? Something about this case troubled me, told me in the deepest parts of my mind and heart that I should just leave Lavinia Terrace and her not-quite-father alone. But another section of my brain

whispered softly, constantly, to figure out what exactly was going on in that little cabin. At dinner with Spencer, I was unable to get my mind off of it, and eventually told him what little I knew. “She may not be entirely safe in that home,” he mused.

“But she seemed so happy and content,” I argued, the hairs on the back of my neck rising just thinking about it.

“You of all people know that a child can act like she’s the happiest person on earth and show up at social services one day later,” Spencer pointed out, motioning with his fork. I admitted my defeat and turned to my spaghetti. My husband was silent for a moment, deep in thought. Finally, he whistled and murmured, “Lavinia, huh? What a tragic name.”

“Really?” I asked, perking up slightly. “What do you mean?”

“Lavina is the name of a character in Shakespeare’s bloodiest play: Titus of Andronicus. She was attacked and then had her hands and tongue removed. Her own father kills her later.” He shook his head and pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. “One of the many young ladies ruined in Shakespeare.”

I lay awake in bed that night, thinking about what Spencer had told me. Her own father the cause of her demise... Lavinia, a ruined young girl... I drifted off to sleep, filled with horrid dreams of giant, awful deer-like creatures, an endless road I couldn’t get off of, and finally, Lavinia Terrace, wandering about with blood dripping from her mouth, her hands only crimson-stained stubs. I wished I had never gone to sleep.

Early the next morning, I got up before anyone else, took a cold shower to knock my insane idea out of my head, and drove to the gravel path. The sky was still dark. I parked the Expedition at the foot of the hill and hiked up to the little

cabin. Once again, no one answered, so I did some investigating. I combed through the forests on either side of the cabin. I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Then I looked up.

Identical to the antlers I had found on the porch, the white ivory branches dangled down from high above, strung onto the limbs of various evergreens by blood-red thread. I swallowed back a shriek and stumbled back towards the cabin, my heart pounding. "Hi, Holly," said a small voice. I swiveled to find Lavinia smiling at me. "What are you doing here?"

"I-I came to see you," I stammered, placing a hand on my chest in a vain attempt to quiet my rapid pulse.

"Alvin said he doesn't want you poking around," she continued. "I didn't get a chance to ask him about meeting you."

"...Then how did he know I had been here?"

"He smelled you," she answered, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I don't think you should come back, though. Alvin's out in the woods molting, but he could come back early." Lavinia giggled. "I hope not, though. He looks awful when he's molting."

I opened my mouth to respond, but a sharp noise in the distant forest made me jump. "Uh-oh," Lavinia gasped. "Alvin's back. You better get out of here!" I didn't protest as the girl raced back into the cabin. But I didn't leave. Despite every fiber of my body screaming at me to get out of there, I ducked behind an oak and peered through the window of the cabin.

I heard Lavinia suck in a breath. "Wow, Alvin," she laughed. "You look horrible." Then she was quiet. There was nothing but heavy breathing. After a moment, she chuckled. "I know, I know. I told the lady what you said. I don't think

she'll come back." Another episode of breath. "You're such a worrywort. Yeah, she left. Come on, let's eat breakfast—"

Heavy sounds, like hooves on wood. Then the silhouette of antlers shifting through the window. The distinct sense that he saw me. Whatever he was. I turned and bolted out of the forest, racing down the hill as fast as I could. I heard shattering glass behind me, pounding hoofbeats, hoarse growls. My foot caught on the rough gravel and I went flying head-first.

The steps stopped, but the harsh breath continued. I lay on my face, trembling in the dirt. Then a pump of bravery sped through my veins, and I sat up slowly, turning to face Alvin.

"Alvin," I forced out, my voice shaking. I couldn't look at him. In the darkness of the sky, I saw a flash of something white, maybe teeth or maybe bone. Something dripping, maybe saliva or maybe blood. There was a coarse hissing sound, like breath being exhaled through clenched teeth. I couldn't audibly understand, but the message was clear enough. Leave us alone.

"If you let me go," I whispered, eyes fixed on what I figured was Alvin's chest. "I will pack up my family, sell our house, and move far, far away. You'll never have to see me again. I'll call my agency and tell them to leave you alone." I forced myself to swallow, bile rising in my throat. "I promise to do all I can to make sure no one ever bothers you or your daughter ever again." He didn't move, just continued his heavy breathing.

"All you have to do is let me go." Ever so slowly, I raised my gaze. And I met his eyes. Glowing black orbs amidst the shadows of his horrifying face. Inhuman. Monstrous. Unspeakable. "Let me go, Alvin." My voice rose.

A primal cry ripped from his throat, or maybe it came from something else, something buried deeper inside his chest. He lunged, and I twisted away, shielding my face, waiting for death, whatever mutilation he would bring.

And I was left in silence.

Quivering, I lowered my arm to find an empty space before me. Alvin was gone. I stared up at the cabin for a moment, then turned and began the hike back down to the car. Eyes were on my back as I unlocked the Expedition and climbed inside. I kept expecting something to leap out in front of me, something dripping, something gleaming, something-

But I drove home in silence, went to my room where Spencer slept soundly in bed, and began to pack. After leaving a message at my agency, I worked on the kitchen. I was packing up the bathroom when Spencer woke up.

“Something’s come up with work,” I told him.

Something in my eyes must have shown him more than words could, because he went white, gave a single nod, and grabbed a suitcase, heading for the car. He woke Stephen and April quietly, and they wordlessly obeyed with furrowed brows. We left in record time, taking only essentials. We sent for the rest later.

When the other two children woke up, we were already well on our way to a small town in southwestern Minnesota. The same trance that had been fixed first upon me, then Spencer and the older two soon fell upon the youngest. They didn’t protest, and they didn’t cry. They just looked out the windows and stared at the passing landscape. I still haven’t explained to them. I don’t know if I ever will be able to. I hardly got the story out to Spencer. I left out parts even then. I doubt I will ever tell the whole story to anyone.

We've been living in our farmhouse for three years now. Stephen is as responsible as ever, April a better artist and more of a social butterfly. Sofia has moved out of her shark phase, but is now interested in the extinct monsters of the ocean. And Beckett is an imaginative little boy who is obsessed with bumblebees of all things. And from time to time, I still hear the rising sensation in my chest. Alvin is still there. He won't ever leave.

I can still hear Lavinia saying, "He's not quite my dad. But I think maybe he used to be."

Not quite my dad.

...What happened to you, Alvin?

NONFICTION
Grades 7 & 8

**Penni Moore
Hills**

1st Place

Ecstasy

Ecstasy: noun / an overwhelming feeling of great happiness or joyful excitement.

Well, have you ever had a moment of pure ecstasy? What is the true meaning of that word to you? I found mine on a Saturday in June of 2023.

An early morning for me. I wake with tense muscles, apprehensive for the day ahead. Part of me is in a haze of extreme excitement. Why? My friends would guess its source was because of my softball tournament. They'd be incorrect. The truth was, I wanted to ditch my team (I know, how thoughtful of me) and go to a concert in Minneapolis. Alas, I must get up and help my team.

Okay, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't also kind of nervous for softball too. I'm a pitcher and can get way too stressed out about it – more so than any normal human being. But as we arrived, I swallow any fear that was still there, and go meet my team, praying we could just get in and get out. It's not like any of us have our hopes up. My mom is our coach (she's not the most serious person you'll meet) and we've never been that great at softball.

“HEY PENNI!!!” My friend hurtles over to me.

Uh-oh.

In seconds, I'm sprawling on the floor after being crushed by her giant bear hug (it's not like she doesn't see me at school). Groaning, I stand up and give her a lopsided smile.

"Hey, Tenley," I say tiredly.

"Aren't you just so EXCITED?" she screams in my face.

"Sure," I say with minimal enthusiasm.

I greet my other teammates, and in no time, I'm standing on the field with a worn glove on my hand and used, dusty softball cleats on my feet. The familiar sounds of the clunk of softballs being caught squarely in gloves – or flying way over the fence, truly depends on who's throwing the ball – surround me. Not for long, though; after a quick warmup, we're already back to the dirt-encrusted dugouts. Our team is primarily about cheering. Cheering includes everyone, if you know what I'm getting at.

"My name is Odyonn and you know what I got – "

I try to focus over my loud and slightly obnoxious teammates, but this is nearly infeasible. Fortunately, the game is about to start, so I head out to the pitching mound, feeling the stitches of the ball.

"Batter up!"

I sigh. When you're on a team like mine, you must strike them out or else nothing will happen. So, I throw fire. The familiar snap of the ball that hits my catcher's glove makes me smile.

"Strike!"

I throw one after another.

"Strike two!"

"Strike three!"

Three-up-three-down. What a wonderful sight to behold. I walk off the field with a smirk on my face. I know our team can sometimes hit a ball.

The innings come and go, shocking the parents, as we end with a score much higher than the other team.

“Great job, guys!”

Our coaches praise us all for our effort.

I run over to my family as quickly as I can.

“So? Are we going to leave now?” I plead.

“You can’t leave your team,” my dad argues.

“Ugh.” I stomp off. *I genuinely hope we just lose.*

This concert is so important to me.

I yell at myself after thinking that. I can’t be *that* selfish.

I run to go play our next game.

We won, but all I can think about are the bright lights, amazing music, screaming crowd, that I am quite likely missing. Puts a damper on the mood a bit.

Oddly enough, winning two games gets you in a 12 and Under League Softball championship. Thank goodness. I still had a chance to go, but it was getting slimmer by the second.

We played this team earlier in the season. They killed us. I knew we didn’t stand a chance, but that doesn’t mean the game was going to go any faster.

I watch as we get struck out, one after another, and my friend gets out on first. She storms back into the dugout, crying and pouting. Our other pitcher is falling into shambles, her head low.

In summary, I can just say – we lose. No need to go further into the details. Instead, my focus moves back to my parents as I sprint back to them, praying that the answer I receive is a yes.

“Is there still a chance we’ll make it?” I ask with hopeful, bright eyes.

“If we get moving, there is,” my mom says.

I doubt I’ve ever looked more elated. My face lights up like a light bulb. Our three-hour car ride has begun.

Two hours into our ride, we still don’t have tickets or a place to stay. (Yay!) I’m a bundle of stress.

“Hmm. Maybe here?” My dad mumbles.

My mom is annoyed with him at this point too.

“SURE! We don’t care where we sit. Just do it already – get us in that building!” She exclaims.

“Oh my gosh! I swear if I don’t get to go and we are just in Minneapolis...” I was fuming.

“Ok I’ll book it, I’ll book it,” he defends.

We still don’t have any tickets by the time hour three rolls around. So far, our trip has been anything but predictable. I won’t care about our seats as long as I end up getting to go.

We pull into downtown Minneapolis. Do you think we have tickets yet? The answer is no.

“David?” My mom presses.

“Yes, yes, I’m trying my best. These seats might work. Eh, but they aren’t close. How about –”

“Just buy them!” We shout together.

“They aren’t good enough,” he replies calmly to our panic.

My mom and I just look at each other with fury. We both feel the same about his indecisiveness.

We're at our hotel. My dad did quite a great job with choosing a hotel. I'll give him that. The ceiling is a beautiful shade of lightened yellow that rises high above us. Plushy couches, extravagant paintings and ornate objects fill the large space. The only thing missing is the tickets. The. Tickets.

I'm pacing the room, a half hour before the concert's start time, in my planned outfit, a long black dress (not exactly what I wanted to wear), my arms hidden under dozens of homemade bracelets, my pale skin sun-kissed in a light red, when he finally books the tickets.

From the hotel bed he shouts, "Done! We got seats!!!"

Ahhhh! It's happening. I'm going to go see her. I can't believe how lucky I am. I don't think you could wipe the smile off my face if you really wanted to. As we make our way through the lobby, I feel like I am floating.

I see hundreds of other people who are going to the concert as well. I admire their ingenuitive outfits, laughing at a man's shirt that looks like it's been burnt and cut; he's obviously going to the same place we are. It will be fascinating to be around others who enjoy her music as much as I always have.

The Vikings U.S. Bank Stadium looms above us. Something about its tall stature and unique geometric build make it look intimidating. The sky is still bright and glowy, not a cloud to be seen on our way inside.

Heading in, the scene couldn't be more magnificent.

Thousands of over-the-top excited people, ranging from men to women, children to grandparents. Each of us so different, yet all here for one reason. Her.

I'm sure that you are dying to know who this inspiring role model of a singer could be. Well, she might be a person you dislike, and I'd rather not disrespect her. I'll just leave it at that.

I've stepped into the stadium. The opening singer's voice rings in my ears. The rushing of fans causes the heat to rise. Overwhelming?

Yes.

Worth it?

Also, yes.

We rush to our seats, the screams of girls following us. The sounds grow louder as time ticks by to the beginning of the biggest moment. I let out an audible sigh as I crash down into our seats at the very edge of the concert.

"Three!!!"

I hear a crowd of thousands shriek. I shout right beside them. Shocked expressions arise as the stadium erupts with their voices.

"Two!!!!!!!"

The volume gains momentum – momentum no one in a grand amphitheater could possibly fantasize.

"ONE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Everyone goes wild. Cacophonous, unrecognizable movements of pure jubilation fill the air. Unexplainable excitement – there are truly no words to rightfully describe it. Then she walks out.

Tears fill my eyes. That's her. Really her. Screams fly out of my mouth as the first beat drops.

"You know I adore you, I'm crazier for you, than I was at 16, lost in a film scene."

Her voice fills up the void of chaos in crisp, clear pitches. Following her comes a chorus of echoes that felt as though they could be heard miles upon miles away.

"You play stupid games, you win stupid prizes,"

Wow.

“It’s you and me, there’s nothing like this. Miss Americana and the Heartbreak Prince...”

“Boys will be boys then...”

“Where are the wise men...”

This. This is my moment of ecstasy. The feeling that everyone surrounding me is focused on one thing that we all love so much.

“No cameras catch my muffled cries...”

I would trade nothing for this. Not a thing would make this day any better. Nothing but her on my mind. No stress, no pain, not a feeling but joy. Perfect, immaculate, splendid joy.

“‘Cause I know this is the fight, that one day we’re gonna win.”

So thank you,
Taylor Swift.

Carter Schettler
Windom

2nd Place

Biography of Ernie Pyle

On the night of April 16, 1945, towards the end of the battle of Yae-take, Ernie Pyle got drunk on the Hagushi beaches. He went along with the Marines but was disappointed because there wasn't much action. Ernie went on the Le Shirma landing, but then headed back to Okinawa. After following the Army divisions for a few weeks, he finally went home.

Ernie said, "The Marines had it easy." Which is why he asked permission to join the troops of the 77th Division on D-Day. He wanted to be a special guest on their landing on Le Shima, which was around three miles off the west tip of the Motobu Peninsula. The Army wanted Le Shima because it had airfields to help support the assault on Okinawa. On the island, there were around two thousand troops, yet the defenders had made challenging defenses.

Troops had already landed on the island and took the main airfield and two-thirds of it. That evening before Ernie's drinking session, Ernie was told at a journalist briefing session, "Don't be fooled by the apparent ease of the landings on Le Shima. The fight would be bitter." Once Ernie was ashore, he would need a guide. "The island was mined, and there were many snipers." He set sail the following day and landed on Le Shima.

Ernie was killed on April 18, 1945, by a Japanese sniper fire on the island of Le Shima. Ordinary soldiers were

the worst affected by Erine's death. A corporal on Okinawa wrote, "It was a shame [Ernie was] the only newsman to truly earn his stripes." Some Marines took Ernie's death harder than the President's.

The story of Ernie was put together by his writings and the stories others have shared. Ernie was an honored soldier and journalist who fought in Okinawa, Le Shima, and with the Marines. Ernie has a day in his name, Ernie Pyle Day. Ernie was an honored soldier and one of the many soldiers who lost their lives in WW2.

POETRY
Grades 9 & 10

**Annie Scandrett
Slayton**

1st Place

Majesty of Morn

Rays of dawn peek through the tips of the trees,
 enchanting the surrounding world.
The forest of birch is ravishing in the early morning light,
 its splendor beyond what words can speak.
Leaves lie in heaps, blanketing the earth below.
 Their souls are dead, yet alive.
Oh, how lovely is this place. This moment.
 Its very presence entrances me,
 drawing out the dreamer of my soul.

Jacob Lopez
Mountain Lake

2nd Place

Fly

There once was a fly
who had many eyes
and knew how to fly
and did not wanna die.

Every time he saw the light
he always wanted to see some sights
and he likes to see some fights
to enjoy the nights
and he might wanna be in some fights
but he had a little too much fright.

The little fly
went to his water supply
but he was just a lazy little fly
that didn't want to try
because he just wanted to play some fortnight with the other
guys.

His thoughts were outta sight
throughout the night.
During the night he saw a bull fight
while watching snow white
with a night light.

During the daylight
he went on a flight
to drink some sprite
so he wouldn't get a fright
throughout the flight.

He landed in Spain
and he was so drained
his brain was in pain
and it began to rain
but his pain
was soothing when he saw friend Jane in pain.
During Spain there was a hurricane
while there was a man getting detain(ed)
because he obtain(ed) stolen videogames.

The fly forgot it was time for his lunchtime
so he went online to order some fine wine.
During the daytime his hair was out of line
and when things got worse his card was borderline
of being declined big time over dinnertime.

Emma Thompson
Mountain Lake

3rd Place

Christmas Time

The beautiful sight of Christmas is a delight
Fluffy snowman is so cheery and bright
Wonderful sight of snow and lights
Red, green, and white feels just right.

The sound of the children laughing brings so much joy.
Snowball fights of girls and boys
The cold, crisp flakes on their face
Makes them want to dance in place.

The smell of peppermint fills the air
Holly wreaths are everywhere
Reindeers galloping in the sky
Icy cold snowflakes twirling by.

FICTION
Grades 9 & 10

Ezra Petersen
Mountain Lake

1st Place

The Mystery at Red Rock Creek

The sun shined brightly that day at Red Rock Creek. The lush greenery showed off its glistening colors for the last time that summer. The birds sang heavenly melodies that glided in the slight breeze. The sand grasped firmly to the bed of the creek and the trees lightly rocked as critters crawled up it. Time stood still there. But in the center of the beauty rested the tranquil creek itself, the final Richardson family vacation destination.

As their old car came to a stop and Mr. Richardson stopped the engine, Mrs. Richardson announced the anticipated words to her half-asleep kids.

“We are here, kids,” Mrs. Richardson eagerly proclaimed.

Immediately, life sprung into the young children and they dashed towards the creek. The calm creek accepted the youth with joyful arms. Michael, Jacob, and Kimberley Richardson dashed in the creek. Splashing, giggling, and swimming quickly ensued while their parents watched content and fulfilled.

Red Rock Creek had been their favorite spot to end the summer for many years. Mom would prepare the picnic, Dad would grill the food, and the kids would swim for hours upon hours. Anxiety would dissipate the moment of their arrival. The birds’ songs soothed their stress, the sun gifted joy and light, the breeze cooled off any anger,

and the trees stood constant throughout the years, a remembrance of the times before. It was a place of nostalgia and peace, a different world. It was a fortress that no evil could penetrate. Simply a dream.

But as the day came to a close and the sun went to rest, the family ventured home. The Richardson family reentered the world, but now with hope and joy. A magical dust of hope was a souvenir that they would spread wherever they went. And when the kids were tucked in bed, and Mr. Richardson shut off the lights, the day at Red Rock Creek hibernated away into only a memory.

Soon enough, school began again, and as Michael's classmates shared about their summer, he could only think of the creek. They groaned at the mention of that boring creek that Michael talked about each year, but he was not swayed. Michael was a wise boy at only thirteen years old that stood tall for his age with short black hair. His intelligence was rarely recognized and his passions hushed. Michael was a loner. He had great rapport with his classmates but was never the favorite, especially to his classmate Roger. A common, dumb, bully that nagged Michael. Michael didn't bring it up much though, as he could easily see through Roger's motives and stupidity. But he had a drive for justice, and he looked up to his dad, Chief Police Officer Martin Richardson. He wanted to protect and bring justice, because too often that was never done to him.

When the lunch bell rang, Michael met up with his younger brother Jacob. The two had been separated because of their age gap, but they reunited everyday at lunch. Besides, who else would he sit by? But even Michael was a celebrity compared to Jacob, the short, scrawny, hacker. With the wealth of knowledge Jacob held, among his classmates, he still chose silence. Michael

willingly spent as much time with his younger brother as possible at school, because when the two arrived at home, there was no way he'd see Jacob: every afternoon, Jacob locked himself away with the computer, coding, creating, and solving. But as the two talked at the lunch table that day, Michael had a grand idea.

"Jacob, how about you and I go back to the creek?" Michael enthusiastically offered. "We could bring the kayak, sandwiches, and we could have some time together! Isn't that an idea?"

"When would we go?" Jacob replied. If there was one thing Jacob liked as much as his computer, it was the creek. He was free to be himself there. "Oh, but will Kimberly want to come?"

"No, just us, tomorrow. Brothers, sailing down the old creek," Michael reassured. Kimberly was only five years old, and not the most pleasant to be around so the two would have an adventure like times before, just them.

The next day at school felt as if time tried running in taffy. But the hope of Red Rock Creek sustained them until the final buzzer. After Jacob checked his computer, they were off with goodbyes and reassurances to Mom. It was unlike them to revisit this sacred place during the school year, but Michael and Jacob could not wait.

The scene had changed and the atmosphere darkened. It was now early fall and the leaves had fallen. But nonetheless, they carried on with the mission, setting the kayak into the creek. Dismissing it as the change in season, they couldn't help but realize the tone. It did not feel like the magical world they had experienced mere weeks ago. Michael continued, happy enough he was with his brother. The two carried down the creek, conversing about various topics, for when the two were together,

things seemed right. They could spend eternity talking to each other without a care in the world.

Michael turned around to find a beautiful bird on a branch. He directed his brother to it, but when he called nobody answered. A splash echoed throughout the creek. The unbreakable fortress crumbled from the inside. A heavy cloud covered the area and the leaves fell cold. The wind carried in a harsh cool that shivered the dark trees. The sound pierced through the heart of Michael. How could a world of happiness become a nightmare?

“Jacob! Jacob where are you!? It's too cold to swim!” Michael called out with tears welling up in his eyes. Michael jumped in the frigid and murky waters searching for his younger brother. His only happiness in the world would be stolen at the place he felt most peaceful. Michael screamed and cried searching everywhere. But minutes passed, and silence fell upon the creek.

As Michael looked up, he caught a glimpse of a dark figure, seemingly towering over the conquered creek: A decimator, a monster, above the cold, dead, body of Jacob.

Michael could barely breathe. The world turned dark and dank, filled with sorrow and misery. No songs from the birds could be heard, only the blood-curdling scream of Michael. Red Rock Creek would forever be stained with the blood of Jacob Richardson.

Soon after the incident, the city police department arrived on the scene. Mr. Richardson responded with Officer Combs. Overwhelming grief flooded the family in ways unimaginable. A part of them drowned that day, too. A case immediately opened and evidence collected. However, with all DNA lost in the creek and Michael unable to speak, no progress was made.

Days pass by slowly. Fall was full-fledged now, bringing in the cold. Each family member mourned differently. Dad sat silent, while Mom sobbed on the floor for days. Kimberly did not understand but rather played by herself. But the real Michael could not be found. The life in his eyes vanished and his joy stolen. Tears of guilt and sorrow welled up daily. He had no will, he simply faded away.

The funeral brought closure to Mrs. Richardson, but Michael's mind was racing. Many attended, from classmates to Officer combs, the community supported them. The hard day quickly came to an end. Jacob was gone. But who was that man? Why would he kill Jacob? What could Michael have done to save him?

With the case still open more investigation ensued. Michael was interrogated, his family, and Jacob's classmates. The normally passive Michael could not take it any longer and burst out in anger one day at school...

It was a normal day, nobody to talk to, but no problems. Michael sat alone at the lunch table, thinking about the last talks he had with his brother. But Roger decided to sit with him. Initially shocked, and then hopeful, Michael welcomed him with little words.

"I'm sorry about your brother," Roger said in such a kind and genuine tone. Michael was in no place to talk to his past bully about his deceased brother, so he timidly nodded. Michael had the slightest glimmer of hope down in the lowest caverns of his heart, but his heart would cave in again.

"It must've been hard to let that happen. Was there really another man? What is really true Michael?" Roger cruelly replied.

Michael lost all control. He quickly repaid Roger for the hurt he had brought him. He began to hit him as if

Roger was the one that murdered Jacob. As teachers pulled Michael away, all he could see was Roger's cruel, bloody smirk.

The police now revisited the case with more motivation than ever. For hours, Michael was interrogated, for rumours labeled him as the criminal. Officer Combs took a special look into Roger. With Roger's motives and history, he became a top suspect. However, no evidence could be found. Roger had alibis and witnesses. Reportedly, Michael was the only person on the scene.

That day Michael drove home with his dad. The fall rain tapped away at his window, chipping away each memory of summer. The trees were bare and sun-covered. Silence filled the town. Michael visited his brother's room, not touched since the tragic day at Red Rock Creek. There remained his clothes, his toys, his posters, his computer. He still lived there. It was as if he never left and it was all a nightmare. How could such a quiet, sullen boy be the piece of the family that held them together? He shone like the sun on the summer days at the creek. He brought hope and joy to the family. He was constant like the strong trees. He could not be bent by the wind, but only brought beauty in silence.

Jacob was a tranquil creek, flowing in solitude, nourishing the land, radiating peace. But the creek could be polluted, and Jacob could not. Summer too had to go away; the magic could not be contained to one creek. And so Jacob blew away like the wind. The creek would soon freeze and hibernate away, it would be only a memory.

Michael sat down at Jacob's computer, turning it on. Just then his world flipped upside down again. Behind walls of code and secrecy lay a file – last opened by Jacob. It read, "Officer Combs Scandal." Jacob had solved a

mystery. A detailed account of Officer Combs' corruption and drug trafficking fell into Michael's hands.

"Dad, come see this!" Michael eagerly yelled.

"This changes everything."

The Chief of Police, Mr. Richardson, sat down and read the account of his own officer's crimes. He immediately ordered Michael out of the room. For hours he analyzed the account and its accuracy, until he came to the conclusion, Jacob had hacked Combs' computers.

Not knowing who to trust, Mr. Richardson drove to Combs' house, arresting him himself. A case unfolded, unveiling eight corrupt cops and a murderer. On November 6th, two months after the incident, Sean John Combs was arrested for drug trafficking and murder. The case was closed.

The following months were hard. The act was not made right, but hope sparked. It was as if Jacob's legacy still lived on, uniting them again. That next summer, the Richardson family returned to the creek. It was not the same. They realized the creek held no magical peace, but the family did. They cried and laughed that day, remembering Jacob and all he brought. But the fall didn't swoop in as soon that year. The sun beamed hope, the birds sang an extra measure, the trees stayed green a little longer, and the creek sat still. So, Red Rock Creek still lived happily in their memories. They felt like Jacob was still around when they went there. The creek anchored them to peace, but most of all to hope. Hope of the break of summer, when the sorrow fades away, time stands still, and joy flows like a tranquil creek.

Shelby Penner
Mountain Lake

2nd Place

Night Stalkers

Thunder rolled through the sky like a mighty drum, and brilliant flashes of lightning illuminated the dark clouds hanging ominously overhead. Heavy sheets of rain cascaded down upon the weathered roof of a small, rustic shack, creating a rhythmic symphony that echoed in the air. Velkan sat against the side of a small shack, sheltered by its overhanging roof. The warm air wrapped around him, fragrant with the earthy scent of damp soil and fresh rain, making the scene oddly comforting. With the soothing sound of the rain enveloping him, it was easy to drift into a light slumber, the chaos of the storm fading into the background.

Suddenly, the soft sound of approaching footsteps interrupted his peaceful nap. Without bothering to open his eyes, Velkan spoke up, "If you're looking for my father, he's at the market." His voice was still caught in the remnants of sleep.

"I know, but I was looking for you," answered a sweet, calm voice that cut through the downpour like a melody.

Velkan strained his memory, recognizing the voice yet unable to place it. "Well, you must have mistaken me for someone else, Ma'am. Nobody looks for me," he said sarcastically.

There was a gentle giggle in response, "I do," the visitor insisted, with warmth threading through her words.

Finally, curiosity got the better of him, and Velkan cracked open his eyes. Standing before him was a young lady with a face so beautiful she looked like an angel. A deep red cloak enveloped her, its soft fabric contrasting vividly with the stormy backdrop, ending just above her knees. Her chestnut-brown hair was pulled into a neat bun with a few loose strands escaping to frame her delicate face.

“Aleera,” Velkan breathed. In an instant he sprang to his feet. “Sorry, I didn’t know it was you.”

Aleera smiled softly, her eyes were sparkling with a mix of warmth and sadness. “It’s okay. I wasn’t expecting you to recognize me. I’m sorry for not coming to see you sooner.”

“No, it’s okay,” he replied with a hint of understanding in his tone. “I understand not wanting to see the one person who reminds you of Victor. But it’s nice to see you again.”

Aleera gave a small nod, her gaze shifting to the horizon. “I need you to come with me. I want to show you something.”

Velkan was intrigued, “Lead the way.”

They trudged through the muddy streets, the damp earth clinging to their boots as they made their way toward the shadowy north edge of town. A thick fog hung in the air, swirling around them like an unwelcoming shroud, as Velkan’s heart ached with the weight of nostalgia and loss. He missed the carefree days spent with Aleera, her laughter ringing brightly in his ears, a stark contrast to the grim reality that now surrounded them.

It had always been the three of them — Velkan, Aleera, and her brother Victor — an inseparable trio exploring the world together. The memories of their adventures felt bittersweet; Victor’s spirited energy was a beacon in their lives, and Aleera had always been the spark

that brought joy to their escapades. But everything changed that fateful night when Victor was attacked by a Night Stalker. The mere thought of those dark, twisted creatures stirred a deep-seated loathing within Velkan. Night Stalkers were not just predators; they were grotesque horror incarnate, feeding off the terror of their victims. If fate deemed you unlucky, death was a merciful escape; but for those who survived, the curse was far worse — a transformation into one of those mindless, ravenous monsters.

Victor had not been so fortunate. Velkan could picture the scene vividly: the struggle, the desperation in Aleera's eyes as she fought to save her brother. As they walked onward, the weight of the past pressed heavily on Velkan, a reminder of the fragile line between who they were and what they had lost.

Aleera paused for a moment at the edge of the forest, as if deciding whether this was a good idea. However, she pressed on until they reached a clearing deep within the woods. She motioned for Velkan to climb a tree at the edge of the clearing. Once they were both settled on a strong branch, Aleera said, “We must be quiet when it comes into the clearing.”

Velkan was on the verge of asking about what was going to emerge into the clearing when a gentle rustling sound caught his attention from the opposite side. As he turned his gaze, a figure slowly emerged from the dense underbrush. It stood tall and imposing, its silhouette reminiscent of a man, but as it stepped into the light, Velkan's breath hitched. Instead of the familiar texture of human skin, this being was covered in mesmerizing dark grey-blue scales that glimmered subtly under the dappled sunlight. Its long, sinuous tail flowed behind it gracefully, adding an air of both elegance and danger to its presence.

Eagle-like claws gripped the ground with menacing precision, sharp and formidable on both its hands and feet. The head was adorned with larger, pointed scales, reminiscent of a crown or a wild mane, glinting ominously in the sunlight.

As it prowled closer to the tree where Velkan and Aleera were hidden, Velkan couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched. He observed that the creature's nose and jaw were slightly elongated, suggesting a snout while still maintaining a human-like appearance. Its eyes, dark and reflective, held an intelligence that sent a shiver down Velkan's spine. It was unmistakably a Night Stalker, the embodiment of lurking danger in the shadows of the night.

Velkan glanced over at Aleera, expecting an explanation, but instead found her eyes brimming with tears. The look she gave him was a haunting mix of regret and fear, silently pleading, "I'm sorry." Just as the weight of the moment hung heavy in the air, the branch she was perched upon gave way with a splintering crack, sending her tumbling into the clearing below.

The Night Stalker halted its advance, its predatory gaze fixated on Aleera, eyes glimmering like malevolent stars in the twilight. Frozen in a grip of terror, Aleera felt her heartbeat echoing in her ears, drowning out the world around her. Just as the monstrous creature leapt towards her, poised to strike, Velkan surged from the shadows of the tree with a desperate resolve. He reached her just in time, shoving the beast aside, their bodies tangent to chaos. The Night Stalker unleashed a chilling, blood-curdling screech that reverberated through the trees, its voice a haunting echo of despair and rage.

They crashed into the damp earth, a tumultuous flurry of limbs and mud, desperately grappling for dominance. For a fleeting moment, it appeared Velkan had gained the upper

hand, pushing the Night Stalker back into the muck. But then the creature revealed its cunning nature, unveiling a hidden weapon that twisted the tide of the struggle.

The Night Stalkers unfurled two massive wings. With a powerful flap, the wings propelled it upward, lifting not just itself but Velkan as well, who hung on for dear life as they ascended. The creature flew high enough to see the tops of the trees. Then the Night Stalker released Velkan, casting him from its grasp. Velkan fell helplessly as the creature dove in pursuit, its wings slicing through the air like knives.

Velkan hit the ground hard. The Night Stalker landed next to him and seemed to gloat over his victory. It slowly lowered its head next to Velkan's, its snake-like eyes peering at him hungrily. Velkan tried to get up, but the creature pinned him with a claw on his chest. The Night Stalker ran its forked tongue over its sharp teeth, showing off its fangs. Then the creature buried its teeth deep in Velkan's neck.

Velkan could feel the Night Stalker's venom filling his veins. Pain shot through his whole body, it felt like claws were tearing out his insides, but he couldn't make a sound. He heard Aleera scream, but couldn't do anything to help her. He failed to protect her, his sacrifice did nothing. Then the darkness enveloped him.

Pain, that's all he felt. His head felt like a boulder had been slammed into it, and his blood felt like fire in his veins. It hurt to breathe like knives being stabbed into his lungs. He hoped the Night Stalker would come to snuff out his spark of existence. "Velkan, please don't die, I'd never forgive myself if you did," said a voice wavering like she was on the brink of tears.

It was Aleera. Velkan tried to open his eyes, but they wouldn't respond. He tried to say her name but it came out like a groan. "You need to rest. He was not supposed to injure you this badly. You gave him quite a fight."

Velkan heard the sound of footsteps approaching from his left. The scent of sweat and blood accompanied the visitor. "You're back," Aleera said with a gasp.

"Is Velkan all right? I didn't kill him, did I?" the visitor asked. Aleera and the newcomer kept talking but their voices slowly faded away, leaving Velkan in darkness once again.

The smell of smoke filled the air. Velkan could hear the wood crackling and popping. He slowly opened his eyes to see the ceiling of a cave. The sandy brown rock was jagged with stalactites reaching down. He turned his gaze to the fire and saw a girl sitting near it watching it intently. Her back was turned to him, so he couldn't see her face, but he knew it was Aleera. A deep pink lily was tucked in her hair, accompanied by three violets. She was humming softly to herself. Velkan propped himself up with an arm, smelling the sweet fragrances drifting from the flowers in Aleera's hair.

He slowly got up, keeping his eyes glued to Aleera. He reached out his hand to touch her, but before he reached her, he noticed his arm. Instead of smooth skin, it was covered with rough blue-grey scales. His fingers had elongated with long black claws on the tips. He leaped back with a yelp, and fell on the ground. His whole body was covered with the scales, and his feet had turned into eagle-like talons. He was a Night Stalker.

He couldn't breathe. The world felt like it was coming apart. He jumped when a hand touched his shoulder; it was Aleera. She gave him a concerned look, and moved her mouth like she was speaking, but Velkan couldn't hear her. He leapt to his feet and ran out of the cave. Velkan put his hands over his eyes, hoping that his scales would disappear.

Velkan ran for what felt like forever, but he had to stop when he came to the edge of a bluff. He looked out

below him and saw the small village of Farburn, his home. He could imagine his father seeing him. He would freak out, and probably kill him, because he was a Night Stalker. All his friends in the village, though they weren't many, would run away in fear of him. His mother would faint at the sight of him. Velkan could never go back.

He heard a stick snap behind him, and watched another Night Stalker walk out of the trees. Usually Velkan would have been afraid, but now it didn't matter. The other Night Stalker slowly sauntered closer as if it didn't want to be there. They met eyes for a moment and Velkan recognized them. He held out his disfigured arm, "Don't come any closer," he said as anger boiled up inside him. "You already made my life wretched. Do you want to double my pain, you freak?"

The other Night Stalker stopped, and made a hurt, embarrassed face. "I'm sorry, Velkan. I didn't want to put you through all this pain, but you were the only one I could trust."

"How do you know my name?" Velkan asked while lowering his arm.

"I've known you for a long time." The Night Stalker gave him a hopeful look as he said, "It's me, Victor."

Velkan didn't want to believe it but deep down he knew it was true. "I'll answer all your questions, but we need to get back to the cave. Aleera will be worried."

As they walked back, Victor tried to answer all the questions Velkan shot at him. It was a lot of information to take in all at once. The Night Stalkers have a Queen, and she controls all the Night Stalkers with a hive mind. But somehow Victor had escaped her grasp and been sabotaging the Night Stalkers plans. Victor heard of a major invasion of Pinewood Valley, where Farburn was located, and he needed Velkan's help to stop them.

“How come I’m not under the Queen’s control?” Velkan asked as the cave came into view.

“Because I turned you, and I wasn’t under her control,” Victor answered. “The hive mind works like a virus, if you’re turned by someone infected by it, it will spread to you. I was turned by an almost dead Night Stalker, so the Queen had already released her grip on it.”

“You’re back!” yelled Aleera in a jubilant voice, interrupting Victor. “I thought we lost you,” she continued as she pulled Velkan into a hug. He was surprised that she would even touch him. “I made some stew while you were gone.”

Victor gave more detail about the Night Stalker invasion, while they ate. It was going to happen in two months. In those two months Victor would train Velkan and get him ready for the mission. He explained the plan and how it was going to work. “And if it doesn’t work, Aleera, you’re going to have to evacuate to the valley.”

She nodded slowly, knowing how grave the situation would be. There was little chance of success, but they were going to try and stop the Night Stalkers anyway. If they didn’t try, a lot of people would die.

The next two months moved by quickly, too quickly for Velkan. He had progressed a lot over the past few weeks. He could fly better than a falcon, and fight better than the most well-trained warriors. His sneaking abilities would make a tiger jealous. But he still felt unprepared for the task ahead of him. Victor had taught him about all the Night Stalker weaknesses and how to exploit them. But knowing that soon he was going to have to face them still made him queasy.

Everything was set; all they had to do was wait. Aleera should be in Farburn by now, hopefully getting the villagers ready to evacuate. They had set up many traps all

over the place, trying to stop as many Night Stalkers as they could before they reached the valley. But would it be enough?

Velkan spotted the first Night Stalker around Midnight. It was missing an arm, and had scars all over it. Someone might've thought that it must have been disliked by the other Night Stalkers, but that's how brutal the Night Stalkers really were, they didn't just fight and kill people, they also killed each other.

Victor slowly spread his wings, and Velkan followed his lead. When the first Night Stalker was eight feet away, Victor and Velkan leapt into the sky. That startled the Night Stalkers making them turn and fight each other. It was an all-out blood bath.

Velkan and Victor had hidden in a thick pine tree, if the other Night Stalkers saw either of them they would likely get killed. Velkan watched as the Night Stalkers tore each other apart, pulling off limbs, ripping chunks of flesh off bones, and blood spewing everywhere. It was absolute carnage.

Luckily for the Night Stalkers (not lucky for Velkan and Victor), the Queen had made one Night Stalker smarter than the rest. She put him in charge to make sure the invasion got accomplished. He eventually got the Night Stalkers under control again. With less than half the troops left, he continued the march for Pinewood Valley.

"This was not part of the plan," Velkan whispered. "What do we do?"

After a long pause, Victor said, "We kill the leader. Without him the entire Night Stalker army would be in chaos."

They watched the Night Stalker horde march away for a few minutes before Velkan said, "I'll kill him. You

keep the rest of them distracted.” Then he lifted off out of the tree before Victor could protest.

From the sky it was easy to pick out which one was the leader. He had deep red spikes running along his spine, and the horde of Night Stalkers made a wide circle around him, as if trying to avoid being near him.

Velkan waited for Victor to rile up the Night Stalkers again before he made his move. As the Night Stalkers fought each other, Velkan dove into the slaughter and landed right on the leader’s back. The creature screeched, most likely trying to call for help, but none of the other Night Stalkers noticed over the sound of the massacre.

Velkan quickly dug his claws into the creature's shoulders and wrapped his tail around its chest pinning down its wings. The Night Stalker tried to pull Velkan off but to no avail. Then the creature tried a new strategy, it started ramming its back into the trees, pinning Velkan between them. The creature succeeded in knocking Velkan off, but failed to get free of his grasp. Velkan knew he had to kill it quickly because he wouldn’t survive a long fight with it. He swiftly lunged at the creature sinking his teeth in its neck. The creature let out another screech as it slashed its claws across Velkan’s face. He retaliated by stabbing the creature in the stomach with his claws. The Night Stalker shuddered, weakly calling out once more for its comrades to help him. Then it went limp and moved no more.

Velkan dropped the lead Night Stalker’s body and took off into the air. He landed in a tall oak tree a good distance from the decimation. Velkan could still hear the slaughter down below, bones cracking, Night Stalkers screeching in pain and in triumph. The noise slowly subsided as more and more Night Stalkers were murdered. It wasn’t until the forest was silent that Victor joined Velkan in the tree.

They sat there in silence for a while. They had saved Pinewood Valley. Everyone was safe. But the forest was covered with blood. Velkan had never before seen anything that violent.

It was nearly dawn when Velkan and Victor got back to the cave. Aleera was already there when they arrived. She had a small fire going, roasting a rabbit. She smiled brightly when they entered the cave, brightening their spirits. They sat in silence for a while not wanting to think about the events of last night.

It was Aleera that broke the silence, “I spoke to your family, Velkan. They missed you. They put up a nice gravestone for you.”

Velkan nodded. “It’s good to know that they care. But they aren’t safe yet. The Queen probably won’t give up that easily.”

“She’ll try again. Nobody will be safe until the queen is dead,” Victor said gravely.

“But we’ll always be there to protect them, right,” Aleera said. “We’ll never quit till Pinewood Valley is safe.”

Victor and Velkan nodded in agreement. Nothing was going to stop them from defending their families, their friends, or the innocent of Pinewood Valley. It was their job to protect them. Whether the villagers knew it or not, they had a wall of defense protecting them from the Queen and her Night Stalkers.

Audrey Dick
Mountain Lake

3rd Place

Iris' Secret

The ring of the office phone scared me to death when it rang at 1:00am. Granted, I was asleep on my files and folders, and yes, I am indeed a lawyer. Meg, the lady at the front desk, said she had a call for me. There was something in her voice that told me it was not just about the custody of a divorcee's cat.

"Your Grandma Ellie has had an accident,"

My immediate thought was, *adult diapers are an alternative*, but that was clearly Elise One-a.m Brain speaking. Reality slapped me in the face and woke me up.

"What happened? Is she all right?" I clutched the phone close to my ear awaiting her response.

Mostly, Grandma Ellie was okay. A loose floorboard just got the best of her, and it got her good. She was carrying an extremely heavy box of books, a box that she shouldn't have been carrying in the first place, to the back of her adorable little book store. She tripped over a loose floorboard and the box inevitably fell on top of her. The recovery would be lengthy but she would be able to get there; she was a tough cookie.

Before I get ahead of myself, though, let me give you a little backstory.

My grandma, Eleanor, also fondly known as Ellie, lives among the beautiful sandy beaches and gorgeous trees of Montgomery Island, which is off the coast of Washington.

It was named after the notoriously brilliant author Lucy Maud Montgomery; the islanders are quite literary folk. I lived on the island with my mom and Grandma my entire childhood. My mom adopted me as a single mother and I am so grateful for the love she, my Grammy and the whole island has extended over to me. If there was a lawyer needed by anyone I would've started my practice there. The island is small and the gossip circle is bigger than the Pacific, so there's really no need for my services.

But when my mom called me to come and give her a hand, I knew it would be the perfect excuse to go back to the place I love more than anything and to see the people who brought me to where I am sitting today.

Ever since I was young, I knew that Montgomery was the place for me. Slow paced, quiet, beautiful, and just plain me. Throughout all of my younger years I wanted that life. Slow, peaceful, not exciting and unexpected. But the day that we left to go to the mainland is when that mindset shifted in a full three sixty. I saw the hustle and bustle of people. You could sense them chasing after their ambition even if they physically were just hopping onto a bus to go to their nine to five. You could feel the inspiration oozing when you walked down the street and saw an artist painting a lovely family taking a sip of the first hot cocoa of the season.

Seeing it all made me realize all that I had been blinded by. I did see life like this on TV and the internet, but to be there was different. On an island, there are maybe seven kids in each class, people who have all lived on the island their whole lives. The majority of the population is elderly, so naturally Saturday night is bingo night at the community center. There's no such thing as bowling, or a movie theater, or mini golf. Just the people, which is part of its charm.

Back home, I felt like my eyes were opened. Yes, that is a bit dramatic, but I truly felt as if it was another world. Another planet, for that matter. It was another culture, but one I'd never read about in a textbook.

I miss that place. I would like to say I'm one of Seattle's biggest lawyers, but that would be a lie. I love my job, no matter my status: being able to stand for those who can't, and speak for those who are wrongly accused. It is truly a gift and I hope to be able to spread it to anyone who needs it.

Now, though, I am on my way back to the motherland. Back to the place I know best.

As soon as I arrived, I made sure to go to the bookstore first, even before I went to the coffee shop and got myself their signature plum pudding. What can I say, their love for Anne Shirley is surely a sight to behold. Once I opened the worn, green, screen door the warmth of the building engulfed my body and welcomed me before any human ever did. The smell of books brought the beauty of possibility. The small quaint storefront was lined and filled with bookshelves. It resembled something of a corn maize but instead with books; at every dead end there was an armchair and lamp. The warm hues throughout the store made it feel cozy – like you were in a warm cabin, snuggled up by a fire.

As I walked further into the store, my eye caught the beautiful sign above the cash register. The sign read: "Life is worth living as long as there's a laugh in it." –Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*. The sign has been there since my mom was young and it will be there til the Lord comes to bring us home.

That is another thing: the people of Montgomery Island do not like change. I wasn't looking forward to the

difficult conversation I would have to have with my Grandma Ellie. After I had my plum pudding, of course.

It took lots of convincing and reality-checking to try to convince her to at least hear me out on renovating the store. I could already hear the gasps being released throughout the land of ol' Montgomery. It needed to be done, though. The floorboard that practically broke Grandma needed to be repaired, and some other things needed a little attention – not some glamorous transformation, but just the bare necessities. We didn't have the budget for a full makeover. The shop had been struggling for a while now, but hopefully a few renovations would draw people back in.

More and more people were moving away. Kids went to college and never came back (guilty as charged). People were buying more from online stores and even reading online instead of going in a store and having an experience with actual people. The tourist population had gone down quite a bit in the last few years. I hoped the renovations would get the ball rolling on people coming back to the beloved (maybe more like neglected) store.

After about a week, everything was looking so good! They restored some old, rickety bookshelves and a couple beautifully vintage light fixtures were put in. All that was left to do was to fix up the flooring, and it would be as good as new.

It was the third and final day of the renovation. When I walked into the store, there was a huddle of three or four workmen surrounding what looked like a box. Everything appeared to be complete, but the people looked uncertain. Once I made my way over to them, I asked, "Are you planning a revolt?"

The moment I spoke, they almost came out of a trance. They were so focused on this box.

“What are you looking at?”

One of the guys replied, “We found this under the floorboards that we replaced. If someone put the box under there after the boards were laid, that would explain why Ellie tripped on it so easily.”

“Yeah... Can I open it or do you just want to look at it some more?” They all nodded in agreement. I unhitched the dusty latch and lifted the cover. Inside there lay an old book and another small box. Inside that box were recipes. It was pretty full, so I didn’t look through them, but I could tell they’d been around for a while. The book was *Wildflower* by Elise Warren, my namesake. It was my favorite book when I was younger, so I flipped through the first few pages for old times sake and came across something enthralling.

I spoke under my breath out of pure disbelief: “It’s the first edition.”

“Let’s sell it! It could save the store!” my mom practically yelled from across the room.

Though everyone told me to sell it, I respectfully declined... at least for now. My whole life I’d loved that story, but never knew the author. You may think you don’t either, but that’s the thing: no one did. Elise Warren was a pen name and the identity of the author remains unknown to this day. For the longest time I had no idea the author’s name was a pseudonym and I felt I was the last to know. I don’t know what it was, but I felt this urge to find out the true face behind the beloved novel of my youth and so many others. I knew that with the knowledge and resources I had at this time, I could maybe do it. Maybe having the first edition would be of some help too.

I needed to talk to my grandma. She could maybe help figure out what was going on. She’s always been very

good at crossword puzzles and she watches way too much NCIS, so I went to the hospital to enlist her help.

“Hi Grammy!”

“Hello sweetie pie! What brings you here on this fine morning?” she said with a big ol’ smile and a twinkle in her eye. I could see she was getting stronger every day.

“I need some help.”

I sat down with my grandma and showed her the book. Grammy was rifling through the musty pages of the old but timeless novel when a shocked look flooded her face.

“I found something,” Grammy said quietly.

“Man, you are good!”

“It’s journal entries.” After she said that, her smile faded, and she looked more confused than intrigued. “It looks like they’re from your Great Grandma Iris. They’re about living life with her three daughters after her husband died.” She continued to skim through the journal; flipping multiple pages as she went. “Ooo!”

“What!?!”

“She mentioned me in this one. She said I was a very good girl... although I made her a mud pie and got all messy.”

“That’s just mean. I got all excited!” I said exasperatedly, but couldn’t help but laugh at the same time.

“Oh, but this could be something. She’s ultimately talking about the struggles of being a single mother of three, all alone. She’s also talking about some secret. Something that no one else knows and how difficult the secret is to keep... How much it is nagging her to not be able to tell anyone or talk to anyone about it. She also says here that her hands keep cramping and it makes it difficult to do her daily chores... No, it can’t be.”

“Can’t be what?”

“It sounds like she had a secret career. Like here she says ‘My day is but a reality of others but my night is a mystery of many.’” Grandma Ellie pointed to where she found the statement. “I think she’s our Elise Warren.” She took a long moment then noticed my confused face and finally said, “My mother was a famous author and she never told me or any of my siblings.”

“What would make you think that? There’s nothing that would point to her being an author, is there?” You could tell she was processing a lot, so I let her be for a while. While I sat there, all I could think about was that my family was more interesting than I’d thought.

“It would make so much sense!” she said abruptly, forcing me out of my daydream. “I remember my mom would wake up super tired and she would always have these dark splotches on her hands which I now know were ink stains.” She took a deep breath. “I feel like my whole childhood is falling into place.” She sighed; I noticed a tear run down her cheek.

“I remember now, I was about eight years old, when she brought a book home. She said someone had given it to her as a gift for us girls.” Another tear ran down her cheek chasing after the one before. “The year the book came out was the year I would have been eight years old.” At that point, the floodgates were open and we both started to cry. This could be the breakthrough we’d been praying for.

After that, I went to the shop and got to work. I heard a surprised yell inside the door. It was my mother. She had no idea I was going to be at the shop so early.

“What are you doing here?” she said, trying to gain her composure.

Her yell scared me, and I yelled in return, with a hand covering my heart to showcase how utterly terrified I was. “Hi, Mom.” I looked back down at my work. “Well, I just

came down to crunch some numbers to see if I can get any ideas to help out the shop.” *Man, it sounds like I’m in a Hallmark movie, trying to save the family bookstore.* I rolled my eyes at myself, but then was assured by the fact that this was real. “I was so engrossed in my work that I fell asleep.” I said, slightly nodding my head, I think subconsciously trying to convince myself it would all work out. “I know... shocker. Anyway, did Grammy tell you about Great-Grandma?”

“Yes, she did. It was surprising, but also not surprising at all, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah... I do.”

Ever since I’d learned that *Wildflower* was my great grandma’s book, I’d wanted to reread it. Back at my mom’s house that afternoon, I started reading and couldn’t stop. I read for multiple hours. Having a real connection with a book is a rare occasion, but having a genealogical connection with the author makes it more personal and interesting. It gives a sneak peek into their life on a whole different level: the life they had, or the life they yearned for.

As I walked across the store, I noticed the chest sitting on the floor, still open. I knelt down on my knees and took hold of the lid to close it, but stopped when I saw an envelope inside. After I reached down inside to get the white piece of paper, I sat on the couch to open it. I opened the envelope as neatly as I could, and when I tipped it upside down, a key fell out. It wasn’t some hardware store key with your favorite sports team embedded on it – it was a gorgeous Victorian key.

This woman was full of surprises, I thought. I had never in my life met anyone so interesting.

What is this for? Another chest, maybe a jewelry box, or a door leading to a secret vault? I thought about it for a while, treating it as if it were a case of mine, but then I

wondered if the section of the book it was in had any significance. It was not at the very end, not at the beginning, and not in the middle, but rather between the middle and end of the book. So I read through that page and the page following. In those two amazing pages, a room was described: the main character Amelia's bedroom. As I read about her room, it sounded awfully familiar. The more I read, the more vividly I could visualize the space.

I walked up the creaky steps of the bookshop to the dusty attic. I flipped on the light switch and put my head on a swivel. There were no doors up here that needed a key, or so I thought... but then there it was. A cabinet in the wall, and what do you know, there was a key hole.

I put the key in the hole and turned it at a ninety degree angle, then heard an awaited and very satisfying click. I took a deep breath and opened the creaky old cabinet. I knew that the dust and mold would give me a sneezing fit, so I had to make this quick.

Inside were a lot of books, journals and files. The books were quite old, just like *Wildflower*. I took one off the shelf. The title was something I had never seen before, but the author I knew quite well: *Cultivated*, by Elise Warren.

I had never heard of this novel, so I picked up my phone and called Grammy.

"No, I've never heard of that book." *Well*, that's *helpful*, I thought.

But then she continued. "Maybe it's the sequel and it just never got published?"

"That could be. I'll do some looking and see what I can find. I'll look at the other books and files too. If she left the key to this cabinet in her first-edition book, it has to be important. Great-Grandma was a very wise woman, so..." My mind wandered for a second, thinking, then realized I

was still talking to poor Grandma. “I’ll keep looking and see what other treasures I can find. Love you.”

“Love you, sweetie!”

I hung up the phone, put it in my pocket, and pulled out the other books. They all had the same title, *Cultivated*. The files however were quite unique. The first file was filled with paperwork from the first novel, and the second file contained a piece of paper in my great-grandma's beautiful cursive writing. Reading throughout the first few pages, I realized it was the manuscript of her second, but never-published, novel.

It was the third file, though, that brought me to my knees in thanksgiving. It was a deed to Great-Grandma's house, a beautiful Victorian.

Yes, my great-grandma had been gone for a while now, but ever since she passed, it'd just been another one of the many vacant houses on the island. Since there was no legal proof that it was bequeathed to us, it was in the wonderful hands of the government. Can you sense my sarcasm?

For a long time, I had been thinking about ways to bring in a little extra dough to keep the bookstore around. The goal was to have the shop be thriving, not just surviving. The thought crossed my mind once or twice that buying a house to make into a vacation rental would be a good investment, but we just didn't have the money. Now we had the resources – and the house where the great but nameless author wrote her beautiful book. A place where people could go and feel close to God in the beautiful nature and feel inspired sitting in a place where one of the most esteemed novels was written.

This was what my great-grandma would've wanted it to be: not a historic landmark or museum, but a sanctuary.

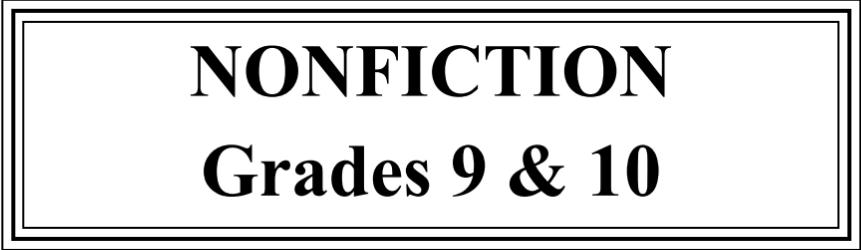
Hopefully, it could bring people back to the island and become a destination for rejuvenation.

The bookstore will be okay, I thought to myself. I felt like for the first time in days I could exhale. I felt my shoulders ease to their normal relaxed position.

Thanks to the recently located novel and the house, we finally had enough so that the store could be at its best. Grandma was able to stand on her own today! (With a walker of course, but don't tell her I told you.) My mom, like myself, felt like a weight had been lifted, and we are more joyful than ever.

I now remember why I fell in love with this place, I feel rejuvenated, like I can see things from a fresh perspective. The town has something else to talk about now, and hopefully it will keep them busy for a while. Folks have already started coming to the island since we started sharing some of our journey on social media, and we hope the B&B will be welcoming guests very soon.

I never had the privilege of meeting my Great-Grandma Iris Jane Campbell, but I thank God for her every day.



NONFICTION
Grades 9 & 10

Nate Toutges
Comfrey

1st Place

Bismarck the Battleship

On February 14, 1939, the German battleship Bismarck was launched. The ship's namesake was Prince Otto Von Bismarck who was chancellor of Prussia and Germany from 1871–1890. The launching of the ship was a state occasion in which Germany's chancellor participated. The ship was the best warship compared to the ships of the greatest navy at the time, the British Royal Navy.

Germany was concerned with defending itself from the Soviet Union, France, and Poland, its greatest adversaries at the time (13). While the Royal Navy was the largest, Germany was not concerned about Great Britain being a problem at that time. Still, its leader Admiral Erich Raeder focused on building a navy that would defend Germany the Baltic Sea (6). His opinion was that ships with better defense were the best offense.

Due to the treaty of Versailles in 1919, Germany's military was severely limited to what they could build for defense, and was not able to make weapons for attacking (4). Germany was falling behind by 1921 as other powerful nations like the US were building 11 battleships. Other countries were building better ships, like Japan and the UK (5) at the same time.

A loophole was found in 1925 in which private shipyards in Germany, like Blohm & Voss, could build ships to meet the future needs of the German Navy. By 1927,

designs for a lead ship for the German Navy was chosen from three feasible concepts (9). Raeder chose a ship with six 283mm main battery guns from three turrets, 15cm guns, and 100mm extra side armor surrounding the ship.

The Bismarck would use the same size guns as battleships from World War I. However, technology had advanced so the guns had loose interior linings that were easily replaced from the outside, making it faster to get back into battle (35). The Bismarck could fire 800 kg shells, as compared to the 743 kg projectiles from World War I (36). The heavier projectiles were fired at a higher velocity of 820 m/s with a range of 35,550 m. The gun turrets were designed to elevate up to 30° allowing the projectiles to travel up to 36,520 m. Secondary armament consisted of 6 15cm twin-turrets, four twin-mounted 105 mm turrets, and 16 37mm semiautomatic anti-aircraft and 12 20mm machine guns. Her hull armament protection thickness had a belt of 110 mm sloped upward deflecting armor to protect itself from projectiles from penetrating the full 320 mm thick hull. This enhanced the strength, durability, and survivability of the Bismarck during battle (31).

Even though the Bismarck was sunk in its first and only battle, it showed how good she was. Germany's Operation Rheinubung was developed to move the Bismarck and Prinz Eugen out of the Baltic into the North Atlantic (143) to take on the merchant and enemy ships in the open ocean (163). The German Navy was taking its time getting from the Baltic to the North Sea. It had to bypass Sweden and Norway. The Germans had little information, and the Royal Navy was given intelligence from Scandinavian surveillance (164). A battle ensued on May 24, 1941, in which the Bismarck and Prinz Eugen encountered several Royal Navy ships. The HMS Hood received a devastating strike and sank within 10 minutes. The brand new British

battleship, the Prince of Wales was struck several times, and had to withdraw from the battle.

Highly outnumbered, the German ships were struck several times. The Bismarck tried to withdraw to the coast of France to repair itself (312). The Royal Navy kept its distance and followed the injured ship. Bismarck began running low on fuel.

On May 24, HMS Victorious aircraft carrier was working its way to launch their Swordfish torpedo planes (298). Bismarck was moving west into a storm and American aircraft were attempting to locate the ship and a US Coast Guard ship (299). Cloud cover, though, was making the attack difficult. On May 26, the Bismarck was located. Nine Swordfish biplanes – open cockpit biplanes similar to those of World War One – did not give up, even with the relentless defense from Bismarck, whose overheated guns were creating smoke that made it more difficult to see the aircraft (302). The torpedo planes flew low over the water as low as 12 meters, too low for the antiaircraft guns to reach because of the angle (303). Four of their torpedoes hit the Bismarck. She attempted to evade the pursuers (309). The Bismarck tried returning to France and the Royal Navy struggled to find her. Bismarck was taking on water.

On May 26, she was located again as she was making her way to Brest, France (332). She was located by Swordfish of the HMS Ark Royal with a second force of 15 Swordfish launched at 1900 Zulu time. At approximately 2020, the 15 torpedo planes dropped their payload towards the back of the ship and took out the rudders. Along with the Ark Royal, 12 other Royal Navy ships were within 220 miles of her location (333). The Bismarck was no longer able to turn because its rudders were taken out by the torpedoes.

By the morning of the 27th, the Royal Navy ships were able to catch up and commence attacking the Bismarck.

Only four British ships were able to damage and sink the Bismarck: battleships King George V and Rodney with heavy cruisers Norfolk and Rodney. It took from 0902 to 1021 hours to finally sink the Bismarck. Twenty-two hundred German sailors lost their lives.

The amount of effort and resources it took to locate and finally sink the ship was incredible. Bismarck needed over 15 ships and 24 planes to sink her over the course of several days. If Germany had been better prepared and had better resources, especially an adequate navy, who knows what would have happened -- especially if they'd had more ships with her for the battle.

Reference

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Alden Klassen
Mountain Lake

2nd Place

**The Majestic Blue Whale:
The Largest Creature on Earth**

The blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*) is the largest animal ever known to have lived on Earth, surpassing even the largest dinosaurs in size. These marine mammals are not only an awe-inspiring phenomenon of the natural world; they also play a significant role in the marine ecosystem. This paper aims to explore the physical characteristics, behavior, habitat, diet, conservation status, and the importance of blue whales in the marine environment.

Blue whales are extraordinary creatures, both in their size and structure. Adult blue whales can grow up to 100 feet (30 meters) in length and weigh as much as 200 tons, which is roughly equivalent to the combined weight of about 33 adult elephants. Their hearts alone can weigh as much as a car, and their tongues are so large they could weigh as much as an elephant. Despite their enormous size, blue whales are known for their streamlined bodies, which allow them to travel at speeds of up to 20 miles per hour (32 km/h) for short bursts.

Blue whales are a uniform bluish-gray in color, often appearing lighter when seen at the surface of the water due to the way sunlight reflects off their bodies. However, their true color is difficult to discern underwater. Their skin is often mottled, with lighter patches that change as they age.

Their long, slender bodies are adapted for deep ocean travel, and their tails, or flukes, are broad and triangular. Blue whales have a small dorsal fin located far back on their bodies. They also possess pleats on their throats and bellies that expand when feeding, enabling them to consume vast amounts of food in a single gulp.

Blue whales are generally solitary creatures, although they can occasionally be seen in small groups. They spend most of their time in deep ocean waters but migrate to warmer waters during the winter to breed. These migrations can cover thousands of miles, with some whales traveling from polar waters to the tropics.

One of the most fascinating aspects of blue whale behavior is their communication. Blue whales are known for their long-distance vocalizations, the loudest sounds made by any animal on the planet. These vocalizations, often referred to as "songs," can travel hundreds of miles across ocean basins. Scientists believe that these vocalizations may be used for communication and navigation, especially during migrations.

Blue whales can be found in oceans across the globe, from the Arctic and Antarctic waters to tropical and subtropical regions. They are most commonly seen in deep oceanic waters, often far from shore. Blue whales migrate seasonally, moving to warmer waters for breeding in the winter and returning to colder waters in the summer to feed.

During the feeding season, blue whales concentrate in areas where food is abundant, such as the Southern Ocean, the North Pacific, and the waters off the coast of California. These areas are rich in krill, their primary food source, and are often located in nutrient-dense upwelling zones or along coastal regions.

Despite their massive size, blue whales primarily feed on tiny organisms — krill, small shrimp-like

crustaceans that are abundant in cold waters. A single blue whale can consume several tons of krill per day, filtering them through their baleen plates, which are comb-like structures located in their mouths. These baleen plates help the whales strain the krill from the water when they take a mouthful.

Blue whales are known to dive to great depths in search of food. They can stay submerged for up to 30 minutes while feeding, although their average dive time is around 10-15 minutes. When they surface to breathe, they expel a spout of air and vapor, which can reach heights of 30 feet (9 meters). This distinctive blow is a key indicator for researchers when identifying blue whales at sea.

Historically, blue whales were heavily hunted for their blubber, which was used for oil production. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, commercial whaling led to a severe decline in their population, and by the mid-1900s, blue whales were considered endangered. However, with the establishment of international protections and the cessation of commercial whaling, blue whale populations have slowly started to recover.

Today, blue whales face several threats, including climate change, ship strikes, entanglement in fishing gear, and ocean pollution. The warming of the oceans and changes in the distribution of krill can affect the availability of food for blue whales, especially as the krill populations move due to shifts in sea temperature. Ship strikes are another significant danger to blue whales, as their migratory paths often intersect with busy shipping routes. Entanglement in fishing nets or other debris can lead to injury or death as well.

Conservation efforts for blue whales are ongoing. International agreements, such as the International Whaling Commission's (IWC) ban on commercial whaling, along

with marine protected areas and regulations on shipping traffic, are helping to safeguard blue whale populations. However, there is still much to be done to ensure that these majestic animals remain a part of our planet's biodiversity for future generations.

Blue whales play a significant role in the marine ecosystem. As apex filter feeders, they help maintain the balance of the marine food chain. By feeding on large quantities of krill, they regulate the populations of these tiny organisms, which in turn affects the rest of the ecosystem.

Moreover, blue whales contribute to the marine environment through their feces, which is rich in nutrients. These nutrients fertilize the surface waters, stimulating the growth of plankton, which serves as the foundation of the marine food chain. In this way, blue whales indirectly support the health of the entire marine ecosystem, from the smallest plankton to the largest fish and marine mammals.

The blue whale is a symbol of the power and fragility of the natural world. As the largest animal to have ever existed, it commands awe and wonder. Yet, it is also a reminder of the impact human activities can have on even the most majestic creatures. Despite the challenges they face, blue whales are slowly recovering, thanks to global conservation efforts. Their importance in the marine ecosystem and their role in maintaining the health of the oceans cannot be overstated. Protecting blue whales and their habitats is not just about safeguarding a single species, but about preserving the health of the entire planet.

POETRY
Grades 11 & 12

**Nate Noble
Marshall**

1st Place

A Message to the Reader

Hey!
Are you doing okay?
Be honest
Just a reminder
You are doing great
You survived another day
Not all your worries will hang with you
Keep fighting!
You are strong. Believe that
Look beyond your struggles
There's light after every tunnel
For you, dear reader,
Can get through everything
You've won every battle you've fought in
Don't give way
Don't give up hope.

Melanie Engels
Ivanhoe

2nd Place

Rock Picking

I woke up to a beautiful sunny day,
 hoping to go outside to play.
 At breakfast the announcement was made
 by Dad: “We will be picking rocks today!”

From all of us kids came groans of dread,
 wishing we were sick in bed.
 One trudged to the kitchen to find the bread
 and others grudgingly found hats for their heads.

With coolers full of water, snacks, and sandwiches galore,
 we were shoved outside the door
 to tug on boots that made our feet sore
 and slap on sunscreen Mom had thrown out the door.

Dad came by and yelled, “Hurry up! Let’s go!”
 And jumped on the tractor with the flatbed in tow.
 I dragged myself off the steps, but cried, “Oh no!
 I need my gloves before we can go!”

I sprinted inside and snatched my gloves
 which I had left sitting on the shelf above
 the toys in our closet. I leapt on the trailer as the tractor
 drove
 down the driveway and around the grove.

The tractor sped up with a putt-putt-putt.
My mom said “Kids! Sit on your butts.
If you fell off when the tractor hit a rut,
you could easily get a massive cut!”

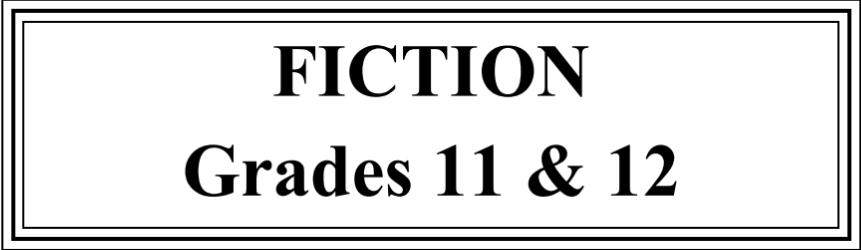
All too soon, we arrived.
“All of you off,” Dad cried.
We slid off the trailer and thrust our hands into gloves stiffly
dried
from last year’s work. I stooped to pick up a rock with
streaks of white.

Nate Noble
Marshall

3rd Place

Paranoia

Wow it's over
 I thought this was love
 It wasn't?
 You made me happier than I ever was before
 We were good together
 I was Noah and you were my Allie
 But now I'm hurt because of you
 The memories we had
 All gone
 I'm paranoid of working
 I'm paranoid of seeing you in public
 What do I say?
 What do you say?
 I look down the aisles while shopping, looking for you
 Hello? Where did you go?
 Say something
 I'm scared of going down a hole
 Losing you hurts
 Do you still think of me?
 I'm paranoid



FICTION
Grades 11 & 12

Melanie Engels
Ivanhoe

1st Place

San Francisco, 1906

Beneath him, the ground shook violently. Thirteen-year-old Jakob sat upright in bed and grabbed his pocket watch from the nightstand. 5:12 a.m. Thinking his imagination had run away with him, he stretched and slowly rolled out of bed, only to be thrown to the floor with more shaking. “Papa!” he yelled over the roar of the earthquake. “What’s happening?” No response. The violent shaking continued for almost a full minute, throwing him and his bed crashing into the flimsy walls of his tiny room. The lone picture in his room, one of his mother, Maria, who had died soon after his birth, crashed to the floor, sending shards of glass flying. Plaster from the ceiling crumbled and covered the rough wood floor. The shaking stopped as abruptly as it had begun. The silence that followed was deafening.

“Papa?” he repeated fearfully from where he had slid under his bed, his heart pounding in his chest. “Are you there?”

Suddenly, he remembered that it was Wednesday, April 18, and his father was working the early morning shift as a waiter at the elaborate Palace Hotel. He took a deep breath, but coughed and choked because of the dust that filled the air, pulled himself out from under his bed, and got to his feet, wincing in pain as some of the glass shards poked through his stockings. He slowly stepped out of his room,

pulling his shirt over his nose to filter out some of the dust, and tiptoed to the kitchen, where the few plates and cups they owned had shattered on the floor.

He stopped in horror when he glimpsed the scene outside the ruined window. He walked across the kitchen, trying to avoid the splinters of broken plates and cups, and stood in the twisted door opening, (where the door had been torn off its hinges from the shocks), to see more.

Some of the houses around him had collapsed into heaps of rubble, while others, like his own, still stood, but were bent, tilted, and twisted on their foundations.

In the distance, through the great cloud of dust, he could see the Palace Hotel, where his father worked. It appeared untouched, standing above the devastation, giving him hope that his father was still alive.

“Uff da!” he exclaimed. He stood there in shock, gaping at the ruins of San Francisco around him. To the east, he could see the sun peeking over the horizon, making the twisted buildings and heaps of ruins cast eerie shadows around him. His stomach growled, which reminded him that he hadn’t eaten since last night, but he chose to ignore it. He had to find his father. He stumbled out of his house and started south, toward the Palace Hotel, praying that his father had survived.

The streets were filled with children wandering aimlessly. One little girl sat huddled in the rubble, clutching her rag doll, while her mother salvaged what she could of their belongings. People ran around in pure terror, calling out in a myriad of languages. Some were certain the end of the world had come. Others searched for their families, digging through the rubble with their bare hands, and some only stood there, dazed, with tears streaming down their faces, gazing at the ruins of their houses, shops, or just the city of San Francisco as a whole. In many places, where taller

buildings had toppled, the street was choked with fallen beams, splinters of wood, bricks, and broken glass.

Jakob carefully navigated the wreckage, heading northeast along Market Street, the path his father always took to and from work, scanning for any sign of him. He stumbled over the chunks of bricks, picked his way through the shards of glass, and kept his distance from any wall that looked ready to crumble. The hotel loomed higher and higher as he walked toward it. It seemed untouched except for cracks running through the sides of the regal building. With a surge of hope that his father was safe inside, he pressed on, though his legs ached, his stomach begged for food, and his throat, which was dry and coated with dust, pleaded for water.

As he approached the hotel, he saw a large group gathered outside. He asked a man in a nightshirt on the crowd's edge, "Have you seen Karl Erikson?"

The man grumpily replied, "I have not heard of anyone by that name, but if he caused this earthquake, he better stay out of my way. Talk about a way to disturb my sleep! I will never come back to San Francisco again, that is certain. I sang my best in the Opera Carmen last night. But do I get the best in return? Nooo. If you had come to my city..."

Leaving the man to his ranting, Jakob pushed through the crowd, determined to find his father. "Papa?" he called.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he heard a familiar deep voice calling, "Jakob? Is that you?"

"Papa!" Jakob called back, finally spotting his father in the crowd and running to him. "I thought I would never see you again."

"You almost didn't. I had just walked through the Garden Court to the kitchen when the quake hit. Behind me, the beautiful glass skylight shattered, and the ceiling fell.

Everyone who was behind me perished. Thank God you're alive, though," Papa gravely told him, breathing a sigh of relief.

Just then, Jakob noticed something strange. A plume of black smoke was rising in the distance. "Papa! Look!" Jacob gasped.

"FIRE! Come on Jakob, we have to go help!"

As they ran together through the rubble toward the fire, the smell of smoke further thickened the dusty air. They ran through crowds fleeing the fire as it spread with the wind. As they got close, they came to a building that had just caught on fire, with someone screaming for help inside.

"Son, do you think you could fit through that hole?" Karl asked. "I think we still have some time before the house collapses."

"I can try," Jakob replied before squeezing through.

Inside, the air was acrid, stinging his eyes. He coughed, hardly able to breathe, as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Jakob found the woman trapped under part of a chimney, which had fallen on her hours before. He lifted it while she used all her strength to slide out from underneath. Jakob helped her scramble out of the house to safety. Behind them, the house collapsed into a ball of flames.

"Thank you," the woman said, her voice trembling with relief, as a tear traced a path on her sooty cheeks. "You saved my life."

Just then, the firefighters rode up and jumped off of their horse-drawn engine. One unrolled the hose from the cart and hooked it up to the hydrant, but nothing happened. In disgust, he uncoupled the hose and threw it back on the cart. "There's no water. All the pipes must have broken in the quake," he quietly told his boss. "We might have to use our supply of dynamite."

“Then use it, Sam.” his boss briskly replied. “More than thirty fires are burning in this city right now. Many have started from chimneys blocked with debris. Chinatown has already gone up in flames like a tinderbox. We can’t let this fire spread.”

“Yes, sir. But what building should we start with?” Sam asked.

“That little house to the west of this one. We must prevent the Palace Hotel from burning if possible.”

Sam and the other firefighters got out a box of dynamite, lit it, and set it inside the house.

KABOOM!

The former house settled into a heap of rubble, but its embers leaped to the house beyond, setting it ablaze. This happened countless times. Block by block, buildings were blown to pieces. Instead of hindering the spread of the fire, as they had hoped, it spread the blaze even further. Jakob and Karl watched helplessly as the fire continued to roar, threatening to burn their vast city to the ground. The fire pushed them back with its heat as it greedily devoured the buildings. The heat of the road itself nearly cooked their feet. Eventually, despite the firefighter’s best efforts, the Palace Hotel burst into flames.

The fire chief got their attention. “Sirs, can I ask you to do something for me?”

“Of course,” Karl replied, “we will help in whatever way we can.”

“Go along Market Street and order everyone to evacuate. This fire is out of control. The wind is pushing it along, and without water, we are nearly helpless to stop it.”

“Where should we tell them to go?” Karl wondered.

“To the Presidio military base, directly south of the Golden Gate. I heard the army is already setting up refugee

camps there, so you should be safe. Once you've gotten everyone out, go there yourself.”

“Come on, Papa!” Jakob said. “Let's go quick before more people are hurt.”

Sam, who was standing nearby, overheard what Jakob said. He looked at Karl and remarked, “You should be proud of your son. The lady he saved told me how brave he was, running into the burning building to save her. I wish I had half his courage when I was his age.”

They walked down the street and knocked at the first door. A young woman warily opened the door. “Yes?” she asked.

“You must evacuate.” Karl informed her. “The fires are out of control and will be sweeping through here in very little time. They are already past the hotel.”

The young woman looked down the street, saw the fire, and gasped. She ran inside and herded her two children out the door.

“Where should we go?” she asked.

“To the Presidio,” Jakob said.

She nodded, picked up her youngest, and hurried north.

Hours later, they had completed their task. They also headed north to join the other survivors in the refugee camps. But as they passed a toppled house, they could hear muffled cries coming from within.

“Did you hear that?” Jakob asked his father.

Karl stopped and listened. “Yes. Someone is trapped in that house over there. Let's see if we can help somehow.”

They carefully moved some debris from the doorway and found a little boy who looked about five years old trapped under a fallen wall that was supported slightly on one end, so that it hadn't crushed him. He was crying, but

unharmd. After he had been safely rescued, he looked up at them with his big eyes full of tears.

“Thank you,” he wheezed, coughing up dust. “Have you seen my mummy? She was in the kitchen making me breakfast when our house fell over.”

Karl and Jakob gazed at the ruins of the house. Except for where the boy had been trapped, it was very flat. They looked at each other, not knowing how to tell the boy.

Karl spoke. “What is your name?”

“I’m Alvin. Can you find my mummy?” he asked.

“I’m Jakob,” he answered. “What is your mummy’s name?”

“Maria.”

Tears filled Karl’s eyes as memories of his wife flooded back on him. He looked at Alvin, so small, frightened, and vulnerable, and his heart moved with compassion.

“Come with us,” he choked as he took Alvin’s hand.

Alvin pulled back, still looking at the ruins of his house. “What about mummy?” he pleaded.

Karl knelt, put his hands on the boy’s shoulders, looked into his blue eyes, took a shaky breath, and said, “My wife was also named Maria. I think they are in heaven together, now.”

Alvin’s eyes were flooded with tears as he realized he was now an orphan. He buried his face into Karl’s chest and sobbed uncontrollably. Karl gently picked him up.

“You can stay with us. We will take care of you,” he told Alvin as they again walked toward the Presidio.

When they finished their trek to the Presidio, they found many tents ready to be erected. Karl and Jakob immediately started helping other refugees set them up. Soon, the chaos had given way to order. To Jakob, it seemed that the straight lines of tents never ended. Finally, they set

up a shelter for themselves, ready to go to bed after the long and exhausting day.

That night, they laid down under the protection of their tent. At midnight, Karl, who was unable to sleep, woke Jakob and Alvin and took them to the edge of the camp, where they could look out across San Francisco. The whole city seemed to be engulfed in flames.

“Jakob? Alvin? I hope you never see anything like this ever again” Karl softly told them, his face etched with despair.

The next day, Karl, Jakob, and Alvin awoke at dawn. The air was still thick with smoke and ashes came on the wind and fell like snowflakes. Jakob bolted out of the tent and looked over the sea of tents toward the city. He slumped. The fires raged on, sending plumes of smoke into the sky. He retreated into the tent and sat down across from Karl and Alvin.

“The fires are still burning, Papa,” he said, his voice heavy with disappointment.

“I don’t think the fires will stop until there is nothing more to consume or rain comes,” Karl said softly. “It could be only days, but it could take weeks.”

After breakfast, which was bacon cooked on bricks over a tiny fire, they set out from their tent, eager to help their neighbors in the camp. Near the entrance, they found a woman struggling to set up her tent in the strong wind. With Karl and Jakob’s help, it was soon erected, and they were again on their way, feeling a sense of accomplishment.

That afternoon, they came across two children who seemed to be looking for something.

“What are you searching for?” Karl asked kindly.

“We were going to play hide-and-seek, but it’s no fun with only two of us,” they said.

“I’ll play! Hide-and-seek is my favorite!” Alvin exclaimed, his face lighting up.

“And so will I,” said Jakob, who was already scanning for the best hiding spot.

They spent the afternoon racing around the camp, searching for the best hiding places. The sun was setting when Karl went to find them.

“Will you come to play with us tomorrow?” the children asked hopefully. “We might be able to get others to join, too!”

“Can we, Papa?” Jakob asked hopefully.

“Please,” Alvin pleaded, tugging on Karl’s coat.

“Of course you can,” Karl said. He was delighted to see his boys so happy, even during such a difficult time.

That night, Jakob and Alvin fell asleep the instant their heads touched the soft grass in their tent. The next morning, they were up before the sun, collecting wood for their small fire. After a quick breakfast, they headed out to play.

Five other children were already playing tag, and Jakob and Alvin joined in, their laughter echoing throughout the camp. As they ran past the tents, the refugees peeked out to see the ruckus. It brought smiles to their faces as they cheered them on.

As Karl watched from a distance, a smile grew on his face. He realized that even though the children couldn’t extinguish the fires, they were helping in their own way. They were bringing joy and laughter back to the camp, lifting the spirits of everyone around them.

Three days after the earthquake, while Jakob was out gathering wood for their fire before breakfast, he felt a drop. Then another. Suddenly, it started to pour. He ran back to their tent as fast as he could. As Karl stepped outside, a smile

lit his face. Alvin was dancing, singing, and laughing as the cold rain pattered on his face.

“Come on boys!” Karl yelled excitedly. “Let’s go see that inferno be quenched!”

They ran to the edge of the camp and stood in the same spot as they had three days before when they watched their city burn. Today, instead of despair, they felt a flicker of hope. No one cared that they were soaked through with the cold rain as they watched the fires, one by one, dwindle and die, with hope rising in its place.

After the rain, they went to investigate the extent of the damage. The cheerful songs of the birds echoed in their ears. Their house had been reduced to an ash heap. Karl looked at it, then at his boys, and said, “My father came to California from Norway to mine for gold. All he had were his two hands, and he built a life for himself. I have more: I have six hands, and we will rebuild.”

**Blaine Braun
Slayton**

2nd Place

Beneath a Dying Star

The sky darkened as the next volley of arrows was fired. Laboriously, Arthur raised his shield in a last-ditch effort to safeguard his comrades and what little of himself he had left. But what use was it in the end? Scattered on the field was the hopeless sight of defeat.

Soon I'll be the same as them.

"Fire!" an intimidating man yelled from beyond the ruin and smoke. Not a moment later, another burst of arrows quickly ascended into the hazy overcast.

Please, don't go! The stars look beautiful tonight, don't they? You're such an idiot.

"Whose voice was that?" Arthur said, grasping his head tightly.

While he was caught off guard, an arrow pierced through his worn and splintered shield.

The pain was vague at first. The clash of steel and the screams of the terrified, dying, or now dead men drowned out everything else. As he looked down, he noticed a crimson smear on his chest. The cold spread down to his abdomen, and a jolt brought Arthur to his knees. His hands were trembling. He could no longer bear even his sword. What all occurred within a heartbeat was shadowed by an indescribable feeling of sleepiness. The more he gave in, the more the pain numbed away. He softly closed his eyes and let the darkness creep forth and there she was. He knew not

who she was, but her radiant eyes warmed his soul like the sun. It felt as if she had been right there all along.

“Search the field, men!” a large and savage knight yelled. “Make sure none of these pathetic excuses of knights from Valtharia are still alive.” The sky, somber after the onslaught of the two kingdoms, began to bring storm clouds.

“Such a heinous sight...” a young woman whispered to herself.

“What was that, Princess Tara?”

The Princess remained quiet.

“Are you proud of my men and I? I spend my endless devotion to you training them rigorously so they may crush Valtharia in the name of my future Queen.”

“Quit flattering yourself, Jarek,” Princess Tara arrogantly backfired. The knights, followed by Jarek and Tara searched the bloodied battlefield massed with knights from the two kingdoms.

“Why couldn’t these poor fools simply surrender? Then they wouldn’t have to die,” the Princess mumbled under her breath.

As she walked past the bodies regretfully, she noticed a man grasping his chest that had a stray arrow lodged within. Her eyes widened and her fingers began to tremble. That man was still alive.

Two days had passed since the gruesome slaughter of Fort Valor, once owned by Valtharian forces. Fruitful villages were torn apart and were now silent. Mothers were left to weep without their children clutched in their arms.

Defeated generals and soldiers had no strength or aspiration remaining to fight; they watched their battlements fall and Draemyr banners rise in their place. Empty fields were left smoldering like a graveyard as a testament to the ruthless march of Draemyr's unforgiving force. Valtharia's flags, which once hung proudly, were left limp and dull in color as if they had already lost the war. There were no bulwarks or sanctuaries to provide solace or salvation. Day by day, without hopes or dreams, they watched the ash draw closer.

The quiet halls echoed with soft footsteps that broke the silence permeating the dark corridor. A man descended further into the ominous halls. He was cloaked in black silk and had a malevolent gaze that was sharp as daggers, so much so that it silenced those in his presence. As he emerged from the shadows that encircled the stairway, the guards aligned their posture in fear.

"Father, I'm back," the mysterious man said. "Tell me, what's the current situation with Valtharia? Have they been completely wiped out yet?"

"Not quite. My son," a deep and menacing voice replied, "your sister has gone missing, so I've deployed several knights to search and retrieve her. The last time she was seen was at Fort Valor during our siege."

"Hmph. Of course, Tara has always been like that. She'll never be fit to become queen if she continues this behavior."

"She was never destined to be the queen. The starlit curse clings to her. I've read the constellations, and so too, her fate."

"What! What do you mean she's cursed? Father! Tell me!"

"What do you think those two are talking about?" a guard across the hall murmured to another.

“Shh! That’s King Eldaron and his son, the Prince, Talon Eldaron, remember?” the other guard whispered. “If we’re caught talking like this, we’re sure to be killed.”

The King and his son, Talon, continued in conversation regarding the current situation for several more moments. Suddenly, the prince turned around. “So, he’s the one to blame for this? Arthur Silverhart...” The prince seemed as if he was holding something back. He held his mouth tightly but then jolted his head and neck back and maniacally laughed. It wasn’t the laugh of happiness, no – it was a hollow and terrible laugh, something that came from the most horrible of horrors. At that moment, it felt as if the air slowly twisted and felt colder.

A deafening silence followed that bounced off the walls before the wicked prince interrupted it. “Thank you, father. I shall be on my way then and will return soon enough.”

He left with a cold glance and without another word. But his absence was even louder than his presence— a silent omen that the worst was yet to come.

Her body ached from the burden of carrying him. She laid him against the base of a tree. Uncertain, she shook his shoulder while staring at him. “Are you... still alive?” Tara whispered, although afraid to know the truth. Arthur's stillness was nothing less than unnerving. “I’ve seen how fragile life is so I must help him.”

Despite possible consequences, she decided she would continue to bandage the man she did not know. She took off her royal pendant, the embodiment of elegance. The shaded meadow in which the two rested was a quiet place away from the dangers of war. The air was thick with the

floral scent of herbs, and the quiet hum of life flowed everywhere. Every sound felt distant, including his breath; it was deep and raspy.

As the night continued, Tara noticed a slow flutter in his eyelids. When he awakened, he seemed unfocused, and his actions were hazy. Soon enough, though, his memory was sharp and clear.

He quickly rose to his feet and shot her a burning gaze. “Hey! Who are you? And... Where am I?” He soon realized his injuries and fell to his knees.

“Aren’t you an energetic one? Listen, I saved your life, so you owe me one, all right?” Tara responded. “Also, it’s quite rude to not start by introducing yourself.”

“Oh, I see what’s going on here...” An awkward silence resonated between the two. “You’re a spy and you’re going to kill me!”

Tara stared at Arthur, unamused.

“Oh, sorry, I guess not. My name is Arthur... Arthur Silverhart.”

“Interesting. Well, my name is Tara.”

Arthur looked at her closely as if he wanted to say something.

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

“Oh... Nothing, I just realized that you look a lot like someone I used to know.” He zoned off, gazing into the nearby pond. “Anyway, is there a reason you saved me?”

She hesitated. “Oh. Um, well, my mom and dad died in the war, and I barely escaped from those beasts from Draemyr.” She then looked down as if she were trying to form a thought. “Then, I went out and ran as far as I could and eventually came across you. You see, I’m tired of seeing people die over and over due to a pointless war.”

Arthur smiled brightly. “Well, it looks like we both want the same thing. I believe that we should team up.”

“What – No! Just because I saved you doesn’t mean we’re friends,” Tara said coldly. “And what makes you think we stand a chance against Draemyr?”

Arthur frowned. “Oh, yeah, you’re right. How about I get you somewhere safe tomorrow morning then? It’s the least I can do for someone who saved my life.”

“Hmph, fine. But that’s it, got it!” Tara yelled as she slapped the earth. Arthur smiled and then laid on a soft patch of grass.

As the night went on, the sky stretched vast and endless. It illustrated a deep indigo canvas that was splattered with the shimmering brilliance from the innumerable stars. The stars glittered like shards of a shattered diamond, scattered carelessly. Their soft glow pulsed vaguely in the cold, crisp air. The constellations above appeared timeless. The ancient patterns they represented shone brightly amongst the void, but not all were auguries of wonders. Within and beyond the stars laid darker shapes— shapes that whispered forsaken and condemning words. The moonlit grace glistened through the trees and created an illuminated veil throughout the meadow.

The Princess, accidentally waking up in the night, found herself staring into the limitless expanse of the sky. “Psst... Hey, Arthur.”

She got no response. Annoyed, she tried another time. “Hey, are you listening to me Arthur?” Once again, several moments passed before an answer.

Drowsily, he mumbled a few sounds before properly speaking. “Huh? Why aren’t you asleep?”

“Because I can’t. Besides, this rock isn’t the most comfortable to sleep on. But look up at the sky. The stars look beautiful tonight, don’t they?”

Arthur looked at Tara, as disorientated as if he’d seen a ghost.

“Hey, Arthur... Is everything all right? You’re looking at me weird,” she said while slightly blushing.

Arthur hesitated. “Oh. My apologies, I must’ve accidentally zoned off. You’re right, Tara, they do look beautiful.”

The two looked off into the sea of stars through a frame of trees that bordered a painting of heaven itself.

“I love the stars a lot. Did you know that, Arthur?” She glanced at him, noticing his soft smile and the admirable way he looked at her. “Their radiant glow and the way they twinkle simply marvels me. Did you know that my mother named me after the stars? She loved them too. I wish I could’ve learned more about her. She did teach me a lot about the constellations, though.”

Arthur smiled, realizing he was about to hear a lot. “Go on then, tell me.”

Tara’s eyes brightened with excitement. “Well, that big one there, you see it? That one looks like a turtle; it represents the resilient spirit that resides within everyone. Even now, it offers strength during these cold times. Oh, and that one! That one is my favorite. It’s difficult to see what it is, but if you look correctly, you can see that it’s a horse. My mother once told me that it represents the freedom that roams in our souls like a horse. Unfortunately, with this war going on, no one is free. Someday, I want to do what I want and feel free but it’s not easy with all of the chaos happening...”

“Tara, someday I will end this awful war so you and everyone else can be free.” Arthur looked at Tara, determined.

“Oh, shut up, you big idiot. Like I said, we aren’t particularly ‘friends.’”

“That hurts, Tara. That really hurts, you know.”

“That's so strange. Those constellations in particular I still know nothing about. They seem awfully bright tonight too. They kind of look like... people... like people dancing?” Tara frowned, unable to decipher the image.

Arthur smiled. “Perhaps you'll eventually find out what they mean. Come on, let's head to sleep.” The two drifted back to sleep, blanketed by the bright glow of the moonlight and stars. They shone on, but their curse remained— entangled in the web of fate.

At first light the following day, a golden beam of dawn, piercing the morning mist, settled on the grass. Tara was the first to wake, or so she thought.

She blinked a few times against the morning sun. “Aw, man, maybe it's not a good idea to sleep on the grass. My back hurts!” She scoped out the area to familiarize herself with it. As she observed the area, she noticed the lack of a large rock under her head. “Hm? That's odd. I thought I slept on a rock.”

Not a moment later, Arthur came jogging out of the trees. “Hi, Tara! You ready to get going? We have lots to do today.”

She stared at him like he was a madman. “You're insane. You know that?” She shook her head in disbelief. “You went for a run, didn't you? What about your injuries?”

Arthur paused. “I'm all right, Tara. Anyhow, we should get moving. I have a place in mind for you to stay. There's a small village a little north of here and I know a few people there. I bet they'll be willing to help you out.” Reluctantly, Tara decided to get up and pack her things in preparation for their journey.

Several minutes into the walk, Tara complained, “Arthur, are we there yet?”

“Not quite. We still have approximately... two hours.”

Tara groaned.

“Tara, you know...” He smiled. “I could always carry you all the way there.”

“No way! You can forget that! Not in a million years!” she exclaimed.

They traveled ten more minutes. Then Tara gave in. “Fine, you can carry me. That is, only if you are able to.”

Arthur smirked and swept her easily from her feet. They were now face-to-face. “I hope you’re holding on tightly,” he said, his voice soft.

He started running, then quickly accelerated. Tara closed her eyes tightly in an effort not to puke all over Arthur.

After quite some time, he quit to give them both a moment of respite. “Are you still alive?” he asked facetiously.

“Y-yeah, just barely though. You can put me down now!”

He gently set her back on her feet and smiled at her. “It looks like we are here.”

The village was by no means large, but it was humble and had good people dwelling in it. The two wandered through the streets, greeting those who come by. They went to several shops, explored the village’s beautiful garden at the center of town, and listened to songs the wise villagers had written. In this peaceful moment, it felt as if they could finally live without being stalked by the ongoing war.

But that moment was short-lived.

Not long after they arrived, they felt an overwhelming presence looming over them.

“Arthur... look across the bridge,” Tara said, almost as if it was a warning. As a terrifying, yet familiar face slowly crept closer, the air became distorted and bent. Tara and Arthur stood, uneasy, attempting to unravel who this mysterious figure was.

“Long time no see... sister.” A long and awkward pause followed. “Hmph? Nothing to say? Didn’t you miss me after any of this time?”

Confused, Arthur looked at Tara and noticed an anger he’d never seen before.

“Not in a million years, Talon. You are evil. You hurt countless amounts of people just for a sick war. I would never miss you!” she yelled furiously.

“That’s what war is, Tara! People die and will be hurt. Your softheartedness is why you will never be queen! You are a disappointment.”

Arthur intervened between the siblings. “Hey, you listen to me! Tara is far from a disappointment! She’s the kindest person I’ve ever met, and she would risk her own life to save another!”

Tara stood silently. She grasped her jacket with one hand and held her mouth closed with the other. Her breaths became heavy and uneven, and a tear traced down her cheek.

“I’m sorry, Arthur... I’m not the girl you think I am,” she said with a swollen face. “I’m not just someone who found you. I’m the daughter of the man who killed everyone you...”

Arthur interrupted her before she could say another word.

“I know, Tara. I’ve known this the whole time.”

Tara’s eyes widened.

“This war may have placed us on opposite sides of war, but it does not overcome the fact that we are together now. If death takes me, I will not abandon you, I will not

sever our bond, even if you don't feel the same way. I will find you, in this life or the next because, Tara... because I truly love you. I just wish we had more time b—"

Tara lifted her arms and wrapped them around Arthur. He froze for a second, not expecting the sudden embrace. A moment later, he raised his arms to circle her waist.

"You're such an idiot, Arthur," she affectionately whispered into his ears.

A loud voice interrupted the moment. "Enough of all this! Have you forgotten I'm still here? Tara, I've come all this was to save you, but it seems as if it was all in vain."

"What do you mean?" Tara said, exasperated.

"Don't you realize what is happening? The burden you've always carried has been awoken by you!" Talon yelled, annoyed.

"What curse? No... this must be some nightmare!" Tara denied.

"This is not a nightmare... this is real. Because of you that boy will be dead, and you'll be next! I'm sorry."

Talon turns around and left them. He didn't look back.

"Dead?! What do you mean, Talon? Answer me!" She looked back at Arthur as he leaned on her. "Arthur? You're awake, right? Please don't leave me here Arthur. Please, don't go! I-I love you and I wish I could've shown it more to you, but I didn't and I'm sorry..." His limp body fell over onto the dirt.

"Tara... I'm so glad to see you again. I've missed you," Arthur mumbled.

Tara looked at Arthur gratefully. "Arthur, what are you talking about? Of course, I'm here. I will stay right by your side, I promise." She hugged him tighter.

“Tara... before I met you, I was alone. I always looked up into the sky and watched the stars every night alone. But they’ve always reminded me of something I never really had. I’ve only talked to you for a short while now, but it feels like I have known you forever. Within that time, I’ve come to realize that the stars I watched would be the time I would spend with you. I will always love you, I promise. I hope that one day the stars guide us back together...”

They both become quiet. Their hands folded together tightly, and slowly, in their final moments, their heartbeats aligned.

The sun set before anyone found them lying in the dirt, but when they did, there was a bright group of stars shining overhead that looked like two people dancing. The villagers believed this to be a symbol of the two lovers, Tara and Arthur. This constellation, once known to represent their curse of life and death, was now a sign of hope and light.

It inspired both leaders of Valtharia and Draemyr to form a peace treaty. The world would still be scarred by the catastrophic war for a long time, but when the brightest constellation of the two lovers filled the night sky, it acted as a beacon of hope toward a brighter tomorrow.

The myth of Tara and Arthur was passed down through many generations. Eventually, it became more than a story — it became a guiding light for all.

If ever you see a group of stars that outshines all others amid the night, forming the shape of two people dancing, may it be a reminder of the love shared between Tara and Arthur and how their promises brought a brighter tomorrow. Let it remain as a symbol that even in the darkest of times, hope can be found in the stars.

Fairlane Penner
Mountain Lake

3rd Place

The Long Trail

My name is Lizzie Darby, and I was eighteen years old when the United States declared war on Japan. I knew this would be tough for my younger brother, James, and me. We had lost our parents in the attack on Pearl Harbor. My father was an Air Force pilot, and my mother was a nurse. Both were staying there for about two months and coming back for Christmas.

James and I went to live with my grandparents, Arthur and Cora. I was angry and heartbroken. However, I had my best friend Mika, who was Japanese. She was there for me after my parents' death. She told me that her family was going back to Japan. Since America had declared war on Japan, Mika's family didn't feel safe. They were going to live with Mika's aunts. We would still keep in contact even across the seas. It would be hard for my best friend to leave, but she said she would return after the war.

James had a strong thirst for revenge. He told me that once he was eighteen, we would join the Army and fight against the Japanese and Germans. I wanted to join the war but as a nurse. I didn't want to be a soldier. The thought of experiencing other soldiers dying next to me on a battlefield made my heart drop. However, I couldn't sit at home and do nothing. I knew I could help in this war.

A few months later, after my nineteenth birthday, I got accepted into a nursing school in the military. The school was in Chicago, and I had to take the train. My grandparents tried to convince me not to go, but I was a stubborn young woman.

When I arrived, there were more people than I expected. Some classes were a little gruesome. One girl passed out at the sight of fake blood, and two more vomited at the thought of seeing deformed men on the first day. They told us it was essential for us to handle blood everywhere and the sight of deformed men.

Luckily, I had previous experience with this stuff. When I was little, I helped my dad with the animals on our old farm. Sometimes, I helped my dad amputate a sheep's leg or bandage a dog's foot.

After a year of basic training, I was an official army nurse. I was twenty and waiting to be placed in an army hospital to fight the good fight. While I waited, I returned to live with Grandma Cora and Grandpa Arthur. My grandparents were happy to see me and gave me two letters. One was from Mika. I ripped open the letter.

My heart sank when I read it. She said her brother, Banko, joined the Japanese army, got hepatitis, and died. I had studied hepatitis in my medical class; it was an inflammatory condition of the liver. I knew Banko. He was a very kind man.

Sadly, I opened the second letter. It was from James. He told me all about his boot camp training. He'd finished a month ago and deployed to France.

I wrote a letter to Mika, saying I was sorry for her loss. My grandparents and I wrote a letter to James, telling him how much we missed him.

After some consideration, I decided to get a job at a small clinic during my brief stay in America. A few weeks into my new role, I was unexpectedly visited by a soldier who knocked on my door. He told me it was time for my section to go to war. I said goodbye to my grandparents and headed to New York.

Once in New York, we flew to a secure base in the Pacific. We arrived at a station on one of New Guinea's islands. When we arrived, we were immediately assigned the task of tending to the wounded. In the process, I met a girl named Izzy. She was also a nurse from Texas. She was originally stationed in Germany, then moved to her current state. I was glad I made a friend that day; she was Izzy, and I was Lizzie, and I felt as if I would need her in the future.

Unbeknown to us, we still had a little more training. The terrain around us was rough. Some of it was so densely packed with jungle that we had to travel on foot. It was challenging, especially since we had to carry delicate instruments. Since French soldiers were present, we learned to speak Japanese and French. We studied the terrain of New Guinea and the surrounding islands. We also had some hands-on experience with some injured soldiers.

The longer I was at the base, the longer I worried about my family. I worried about James the most. The longer this war lasted, the more the chance of his survival diminished.

A few days later, we had to ride our way to Rabaul. You couldn't even tell it used to be a thriving area. Everywhere I saw, there was devastation. We weren't the only ones that had changed from this war. We were there to rescue injured soldiers from a recent conflict. We found a lot of bodies. Some were alive. They were American, French, and Japanese. We were not supposed to look for Japanese soldiers. However, I helped any Japanese soldiers I came

across. I knew the Japanese were the enemy, but they were still human and worthy of help.

None of the injured foreign soldiers spoke English. I was good at speaking French, but I wasn't fluent. The soldiers mocked the nurses for our French. The group decided to camp near Rabaul. We were going to meet up with another group in the morning.

While we were sleeping, I heard some movement, and it was a French nurse. She was dragging a young man to the camp. He looked severely injured. She spoke in rapid French, and I could somewhat understand her. Her name was Bridgette, and the soldier she had was Claude, her brother. He needed serious medical attention. I helped her through the rubble to our medical tent. I tended to his wounds there. After some grueling work, I stabilized Claude.

Claude was sent to the rehab area. Bridgette stood by him the entire time. I could tell that she loved her brother. Her relationship with Claude reminded me of me and James. I hadn't seen James in over two years. I didn't even know if he was alive. Bridgette must've been grateful that she got to see her brother again.

We left Rabaul, and we came close to the Japanese border. We found a Japanese base close to our camp. We tried to stay out of their sight. Scouts went to spy on the base. They reported that Sam Carter, a captain, and some American soldiers had been captured. We devised a plan to investigate the premises and rescue the soldiers that night. They took a few nurses, just in case. Izzy and I went with the spies. We looked for anything to help us break out the soldiers.

We snooped around until something caught my eye. I went to investigate, and I couldn't believe my eyes. It was Mika.

Izzy also stopped. Her eyes filled with terror.

Mika walked closer to us.

Izzy panicked. She hid.

I came out from the bushes and Mika looked at me with surprised eyes. "Rijidesu ka?" she asked in Japanese, meaning, are you Lizzy?

I responded, "Hai. Anata wa Mika desu," which means "Yes, you are Mika."

She ran over and gave me a big hug. "Why are you here?"

"I am a nurse and we have a base close by."

"Why are you telling me this? You know I am on your enemy's side."

"I know you are not my enemy. I can trust you to do the right thing."

Mika didn't say anything. Then, I had an idea. "I need your help with something," I said.

I whispered my plan to her. She nodded. I assured Izzy that Mika was my friend and that she could trust her. However, she remained skeptical about Mika, and understandably so. She was on the wrong side, but Izzy didn't understand Mika like I did.

"I trust Lizzie to make the right decision and she trusts this Japanese nurse," Bridgette said in a heavy French accent. Bridgette had followed us from the camp. She wanted a part of the action, I guess.

"She's right. We need some help to get into that camp," said a voice. It was Jake Sullivan. He was the captain. He stood up and looked over at us. Following him was our group of spies. "If these nurses trust her, then I do too. Come men, we have some brothers to save."

"So, do you have a plan?" Captain Jake asked. I nodded.

I instructed Mika to return to the Japanese base and wait for the guard change. The average guard change took

five minutes, and during this time, her goal was to secretly help as many prisoners escape as she could.

Mika asked us what we were going to do with the Japanese soldiers if they caught her.

“We’ll take prisoners,” said Jake reassuringly.

The Japanese patrols were heavy that night. Everyone was holding their breath. Each prisoner Mika brought out, the more danger she was in. At 11:55, I saw Mika helping a younger soldier. Then two Japanese soldiers cornered her. My heart sped up. I heard her speaking in Japanese, but I couldn’t understand what she was saying.

The soldiers became enraged and shot her. Then Jake yelled the battle charge and the unit attacked before the soldiers shot the young soldier. The sound of feet running and gunshots was deafening. I knelt by her and grabbed her hand. She was bleeding fast. I tried to help her but she pushed me away.

“Don’t be angry with them,” she whispered. I started to cry.

“Take care of your unit, while I’ll be taken care of somewhere else,” she said quietly.

“Don’t go! I won’t let you! I can help you,” I cried.

“I’ll see you on the other side...friend.” She grew cold in my hand. Izzy ran over and stopped. Bridgette followed. I knelt there, crying. She was gone. That was all I could think of. Jake ran over. He stopped and removed his helmet.

“She was a brave nurse,” he said.

“She was. One of the best,” I whispered faintly.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He knelt beside me. “We have captured the base. We’ll be moving forward in the morning,” he said.

“She doesn’t even get a proper burial,” I said.

“She’ll get a hero’s burial,” Jake said. He grabbed a shovel from his bag and dug a shallow grave. We moved her body there and buried her. We also buried the rest of the men who died taking the base. I thanked Jake. He went back to camp.

Izzy and Bridgette came over. Izzy said, “She not only saved those men, but she also saved us.”

After Mika’s death, we kept moving. I was silent for a while. Izzy and Bridgette noticed my sadness. They tried to cheer me up, but it didn’t work. All I could think about was how I couldn’t save her and her last words to me.

We reached the front lines to help the army defeat the remaining Japanese. There were dozens of soldiers. Some dead. Some barely alive.

I got to work right away. I went to the medical tent. Once I was there, I wrote a letter to Mika’s parents to tell them of their loss.

Then I received a letter from James’s sergeant. It read,

“Dear Miss Darby,

Your brother, James Arthur Darby is missing in action.

Sincerely, Sergeant Bush.”

My heart sank and I started to cry. This was the most alone I’d ever felt in my whole life. I kept telling myself, “I know there is a chance he is still alive.”

A few days later, the Japanese launched a surprise attack. We fought hard. I ran to the battlefield and started to tend to the men.

In the distance, I saw a Japanese man lying almost dead on the ground. I rushed to him. Once he was bandaged

up, a bomb landed close by and sent me flying. I was knocked unconscious. Everything went dark.

I watched in horror as a bomb flew close to Lizzie. I quickly rushed over to her. She was still alive, but she was unconscious. I picked her up and called a nearby nurse over.

“Help me take her to the medical tent, now!” I said.

“Yes, sir, Captain Sullivan,” she replied. She and I ran as fast as we could to the medical tent. Once we got there, we put her under the care of Bridgette. I put one of my first lieutenants in charge until I returned. She took Lizzie and set her on the bed. I stood outside pacing. I was worried for Lizzie. Bridgette noticed and came over to me.

“Don’t worry, she’s in good hands,” she said.

I stayed right beside Lizzie. Her condition didn’t change much. Izzy was called back to the field. Bridgette became busy. Lots of wounded men came in. The first lieutenant I put in charge gave me daily reports and gave him orders to send back to the troop.

After a while, I knew I had to return to my post. Lizzie was stable and I knew I could trust the medical professionals there. I returned to the battlefield to handle the situation.

With everything that happened around me, I always had my mind on Lizzie. Once the battle was over, I returned to the medical tents. Izzy came running out with a smile on her face.

I woke up in the medical tent. I lay on a bed, hooked up to some medical equipment. I shifted and mumbled to

Bridgett who was standing by me. A bright look came over her face. She called Izzy to tell her to find Jake. Izzy ran out to tell Jake. A few moments later, Jake came in.

"I thought you were dead," he said and hugged me. His words took me aback. He immediately stood up and corrected his posture. He looked embarrassed.

"I mean, I am glad you are feeling well," he said clumsily. I was confused and looked at Izzy and Bridgette for help.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You narrowly escaped getting bombed. Luckily, Captain Jake Sullivan was there to save you," Izzy said.

"He saved me?" I asked shockingly. I looked at him.

"Thank you," I said.

"We also have another surprise for you," Izzy said.

"Really?" I asked. Before I could say anything else, someone walked through the door. It was James! I was overjoyed.

"James! I thought I would never see you again!" I exclaimed as I hugged him. James looked very different than the last time I saw him.

"I thought I would never see you again," he said.

"They said you were missing. How did they find you?" I asked.

"The German soldiers captured me. I was a prisoner for about a month before I was rescued. When I got out, I got a letter from your friends that said you were hurt badly. I got permission from my commanding officer to come here to see you. Just in case you didn't make it," he said. I started crying. I was thankful that James was alive. If only Mika were here.

A few weeks later, things were looking up. I was recuperating and would be ready to leave for home next week.

Jake came home a month later. He had been shot in the leg and sent home.

He came and visited me every day. I got to know him well. He was truly an extraordinary person. I was surprised to discover his wonderful sense of humor. A few weeks later, James returned home. I was so happy to see him again. Things were starting to look bright.

“It was when I realized this that I truly grasped what Mika meant. Her memory will live on in this family. We even made a makeshift memorial for her in the backyard,” I said.

“I love that story, Grandma Liz,” Jill said.

“Can we see Mika’s memorial?” asked Johnny.

“You can see it tomorrow, it’s getting late,” Jake said.

“Okay, Goodnight, Grandpa and Grandma,” the children said.

Downstairs, I carefully picked up a framed picture from the shelf. It captured a moment with Mika. Jake had his arm around me, and together we gazed out from our window. I remembered my experiences of World War II – and how my life was transformed by my best friend, Mika.

NONFICTION
Grades 11 & 12

Genesis Lopez
Mountain Lake

1st Place

Love God Love All People

My name is Genny. Nursing and caring for others is important to me. When I was eight, my mom took me to visit where she worked. She worked at the nursing home. I became attached to the residents, but hadn't fully grasped the idea of death. When I was fifteen years old, I worked at the same nursing home. I did it with the attitude of just doing it for money. I had a total of fifty residents, and at the time I got paid fourteen dollars and fifty cents. If I divided the amount of money I was getting paid by the number of residents I took care of, it came out as twenty-nine cents a person. I viewed each resident as twenty-nine cents every time I helped them. I viewed the residents as a paycheck, not as human beings. I later found out that it was more than just money that I had to worry about. I became emotionally attached to the residents and became very depressed when one of them died.

One day, one of my residents was on their deathbed. I went into his room because no one had helped him at all that day. He had touched me inappropriately. I then realized why no one wanted to help him. He wasn't in his right mind. He was sick and he was ready to go. I didn't understand that, so I put in my two weeks' notice and I quit.

I came back to the nursing home when I was seventeen. I had only been gone for two years. I was nervous to go back to the nursing home, considering my past. But by

the time I was on the floor, I had heard that the man I was once afraid of had passed away. Deep down I knew it wasn't his fault. However, some part of me on the inside felt a huge wave of relief.

During the summer of 2022, my grandpa started to decline. I became closer to him, but not as close as I wanted to be. I had to take care of him for a while as he transferred into the facility that I worked for. I visited him often as he recovered. I think this is why my attitude towards the elderly has changed. I realized I wanted people to treat my grandpa in a certain way. So I made an assumption that maybe all the elders wanted to be treated the right way, too. When I was little, I never pictured myself going into the medical field. In all honesty I never wanted anything at all to do with the medical field. But after working at the nursing home, that's all that I now want to do.

When I graduate, I will be attending Athens Tech. There I will be working for my LPN and after that my RN. I want to work with the elderly. It is something that I already know how to do. Working at a nursing home takes more than an attitude about money. You have to go in with a very caring personality, an understanding mind, and a compassionate and patient heart. You have to mentally prepare or the job becomes very hard. Once you get the hang of it, though, you learn to love it. That's what I did. So with this, I leave you a piece of advice: if you are planning to work with something that has to do with nursing, be ready for any types of changes and set goals for yourself.

Lexi Nickel
Mountain Lake

2nd Place

The Oldest Continually Operating Library

The University of al-Qarawiyyin is the oldest continually operating library in the world. It is located in Fez, Morocco, and is only thirty years younger than the city itself. Some claim this story is a myth, but according to legend, the university was founded as a mosque in 857 by Fatima al-Fihri. Fatima was the daughter of a wealthy merchant. Their family moved to Fez and stayed with a community of fellow Kairouans. When some male family members passed away, Fatima and her sister, Mariam, inherited a large amount of money. The sisters had been well educated, Fatima pledged to spend all of her inheritance building a mosque for Fez, which became the University of al-Qarawiyyin, and Mariam is said to have founded al-Andalusiyyin Mosque the same year.

Construction on the library began in 857 and was completed in 859. It was named Al-Qarawiyyin in honor of her family's heritage and the people of Qarawiyyin. Fatima was very involved throughout the process and ensured it was built to the highest architectural standards. She also made sure to employ superb craftsmanship.

This mosque began its life as a multi-use building. This was not at all uncommon for the time. Most mosques were built to serve as the religious and academic centers of their communities. However, al-Qarawiyyin quickly set itself apart. It is unclear precisely when this shift occurred – many

have differing opinions – but it was likely not long after its founding. The al-Qarawiyyin started with religious teachings and gradually became the first university as we know it, namely the first to offer official degrees. These degrees were based on the area of study and how long the student had studied. All students were required to take part in religious activities, services, and prayers, but aside from that there were many areas of study. The degrees offered included religious studies, grammar and rhetoric, logic, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, geography, and many more.

The beginning of al-Qarawiyyin's fame began in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Other madrasas, smaller schools of learning, were established around the main building of al-Qarawiyyin. While each madrasa was technically its own school, in reality, this was a setup similar to a modern-day college campus. Many of the madrasas even offered housing to the out-of-town students who studied at al-Qarawiyyin. This boosted the amount of topics one could study and added to al-Qarawiyyin's fame.

As this university's fame grew, students and scholars from all over the Muslim world visited and enrolled. This led to restrictions when accepting students. Students were required to know the Quran by heart, as well as Arabic and general sciences. Sultans and other wealthy people gave to al-Qarawiyyin generously. They gave money and most importantly, books. These books were housed in libraries located in al-Qarawiyyin's main building, side buildings, and occasionally the other madrasas. Essentially, al-Qarawiyyin became the Library of Alexandria for the Islamic texts. By 1623, an estimated thirty-two thousand books and manuscripts were housed here. There are still over four thousand precious and influential manuscripts within this university's many libraries.

However, after this boom of success, the university began to decline. Nothing new was being taught and some had even cracked down on the subjects being taught. The university gained a focus on traditional Islamic studies and Arabic linguistics. It stopped teaching logic, philosophy, and other more radical subjects during this period. The faculty also lessened. The university decreased about two hundred faculty members between 1830 and 1906. The library also declined. Books were neglected and not returned. Only one thousand manuscripts and four hundred books were counted by the beginning of the twentieth century.

Around 1912, the student body was rigidly segregated based on social status and the university had greatly declined. By 1922, most of society's elites sent their children to Western universities rather than al-Qarawiyyin. Plans to reform al-Qarawiyyin began in 1929. Following these reforms, the university was reorganized into elementary, secondary, and higher education in 1931 and 1933. Al-Qarawiyyin played an important role in the Moroccan nationalistic movement and protests against the French. Many of the leading figures in this movement had gained their education from al-Qarawiyyin. The university, along with other mosques, became a rallying point for demonstrations against the treatment of protestors. This led to the deployment of the French military throughout these mosques.

Al-Qarawiyyin joined the state education system in 1947. This was also when women were first allowed to study there. In 1963, after Morocco gained independence, al-Qarawiyyin became an official university. After this, the university moved from the mosque to the old French Army barracks. The curriculum and textbooks were updated and professional training of teachers commenced. Four faculties, and campuses, were established as well. One is for Islamic

law in Fez, one is for Arab studies in Marakech, and two are for theology, one in Tetouan, the other near Agadir. This university functions as an Islamic seminary; the only two non-Islamic courses taught are English and French. The age range of students is thirteen to thirty, attending high school and university, respectively. All students are required to memorize the Quran, the Maliki law, and some Islamic medieval texts on grammar. They are also required to be proficient in classical Arabian.

In 2012, architect Aziza Chaouni began renovating the mosque and library. Aziza is an architect and engineer with degrees from Harvard and Columbia. She specializes in sustainably restoring old buildings. The renovation began when some plumbing threatened to break, potentially covering books in sewage water. This soon became a four-year project and involved the sewer issue, fixing walls, patching cracks, and adding solar panels and air conditioning. The library opened in 2016 with boundaries to protect the books, including a security system. The mosque is now open to visitors.

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Johnny Fales
Ghent

3rd Place

**A Fur-Real Dilemma:
 From Wild to Mild**

In March of 2020, the world was hit with COVID-19. Restaurants, theaters, and even schools were forced to close their doors. However, a new door opened for people facing stay-at-home orders. On March 20th, 2020, Netflix released the 8-episode juggernaut *Tiger King*. The popular show even found its way to TikTok. I mean, who doesn't remember the clever Carole Baskin parody song? Joe Exotic wasn't the only thing to garner attention from the world; the exotic animals, such as tigers, lions, and pumas, enclosed inside the park dealing with poor living conditions, lack of engagement, and scarcity of food, tugged on the heartstrings of viewers. The show had many questioning the implications of keeping wild and exotic animals in captivity.

Today we will explore the many aspects of wild animals in living captivity. First, we will prowl around a brief history of domestication. Then, we will feast on facts about certain animal species and after that, we will release wild information on the exotic pet trade before finally, uncaging some of the advantages of keeping wild animals in captivity.

First, let's prowl around a brief history of domestication. According to the National Library of

Medicine, domestication is the process of artificial selection in which wild animals become more favorable to the human species. The domestication process is very long because animals need time to evolve. Scientists propose the first animal humans ever domesticated was the dog. Pet dogs are very obedient to us because of domestication, they have evolved to be able to listen to us; the *Journal of Ethnobiology* even suggests humans have coevolved with dogs, as we can sense each other's emotions. Then humans domesticated animals like cows, sheep, and chickens for the multiple resources they provided, such as fertilizer, meat, clothing or hide, and milk. These types of animals provided us with the goods to start human civilization.

Many other animals have followed, but interestingly, we have seen a recent case with the Silver Fox. In December of 2018, Lee Alan Dugatkin, a biologist and historian at the University of Louisiana, published an article called “The Silver Fox Domestication Experiment.” The experiment proved we can domesticate animals more quickly than we had thought. The experiment started in 1959, but ten years later, the foxes developed something called domestication syndrome. Dugatkin explains domestication syndrome as the process of “cuter” and more friend-like structures occurring in animals. Take a normal silver fox compared to one of the foxes that was bred through the experiment: you may notice more floppy ears and a rounder face. These traits were bred for human preferences, a practice we’ve seen used in other animals. Take the modern chicken, for example. The chicken’s ancestor, the red jungle fowl, lays around 15 eggs yearly, whereas the common chicken lays 200-300 eggs. To help visualize it, that’s roughly one egg per 20.

Like domesticated animals, exotic animals have had periods of popularity throughout history. According to the site, World Animal Protection, many ancient cultures

actually used wild animals to display wealth and superiority over others. They suggest that birds and fish weren't only used for food but for decoration. There has been a boom in the craze for exotic animals recently. In the last 50 years, the shockwave has consisted of birds, reptiles, big cats, and even bears.

Though wild animals, along with some domesticated animals, may appear to be content with humans, it does not mean they always will be. There is strong evidence suggesting that animals also have emotions. In a 2018 study by biologists at Newcastle University, researchers found that “the standard practice of handling laboratory mice by their tails increases behaviours indicative of anxiety,” (nature.com). When scared or provoked these wild animals may be unpredictable, reverting to their animal instincts, potentially being harmful.

Next, we will feast on certain animal species and learn how their biological niches work. According to *National Geographic*, every animal has a specific job in nature, and this is what we call a biological niche. Wild animals are not domesticated, meaning their niches are not for the use of humans, so if you were to have these creatures you might just find yourself on an episode of *Animals Gone Wild*. Take the marmoset, for example; marmosets, a type of monkey, are seed dispersers in the wild, meaning they disperse seeds through their excrement. If you were to have these creatures in your household, they'd throw and leave their feces everywhere. Foxes often bury their food, like inside your expensive leather couch. Wild animals also mark their territory, urinating on your newly refinished wooden floor. Aside from the inconvenience of fecal minefields or yellow pools, animals' excrement and urine can cause illnesses in humans.

When owning an exotic animal, many diseases or illnesses might come with it; these are known as zoonotic diseases. According to the CDC, zoonotic diseases are transferred from animals to humans or vice versa. An example of the effects of a zoonotic disease in an article titled, “Exotic pet trade explained,” published in 2019 by Jani Hall on *National Geographic* states, “An outbreak of exotic Newcastle disease (END), which resulted in the deaths of 12 million birds in the U.S. in the 1970s, was traced to parrots smuggled from South America.” The parrots in question were part of the exotic pet trade.

Now, let’s release wild information on the exotic pet trade. According to Jani Hall at *National Geographic*, the exotic pet trade is a worldwide market in which many humans acquire millions of exotic pets, such as monkeys or birds, illegally through poaching and other means. The legality of the exotic pet trade differs from country to country and sometimes even state to state. Most laws regulate which animals can be owned or exported. According to Rachel Fobar at *National Geographic*, The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, also known as CITES, is a well-known law that manages the trade of certain exotic plants and animals. Many countries use CITES. While the list of plants and animals protected by CITES changes frequently, the laws on exporting and containing exotic animals have not.

Finally, let’s uncage some of the advantages of keeping wild animals in captivity. Zoos and sanctuaries can help animals that are injured or imprinted. At the Wildlife Center of Virginia, imprinted animals are defined as unable to survive without the help of humans, unable to perform tasks they should be able to do normally. When it comes to zoos and sanctuaries, we can categorize how they can help animals with three Es: education, enclosure, and enrichment.

Let's start off with the first E, Education. Zoos often provide information on animals that they own, when it comes to more unknown and endangered species, like the Okapi, zoos can promote things like conservation. The second E is for enclosures. Zoos and sanctuaries can provide enclosures that suit these animals' needs to survive. We can see this with the Omaha Zoo, which suits habits for three different deserts around the world. The last E stands for enrichment.

According to National Geographic, enrichment is giving the animals certain tasks throughout the day that help their welfare in captivity, allowing them to act out their biological niche, through things like scavenging and social interaction.

Today we explored the many aspects of keeping wild animals in captivity. First, we prowled around a brief history of domestication. Then, we feasted on certain animal species and their unique biological niches after that, releasing wild information about the exotic pet trade. Finally, we uncaged some of the positives of keeping wild animals in captivity. Though Joe Exotic garnered much attention by owning exotic animals like tigers and lions, there were many negative issues and consequences with owning them, which resulted in his downfall. As the number of wild animals in captivity continues to surge today with people valuing them as accessories, it is important to remember all the needs involved.

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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 21st 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 11th/12th 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 11th-12th grade category for fiction, nonfiction and poetry each receive an SMSU First-Year Tuition Scholarship. This celebration begins with a keynote address by a published Midwest writer followed by a reception where the student writers meet each other, the SMSU student and faculty judges, and the keynote author.

Keynote Speakers at the Creating Spaces Writing Contest

2005 – Larry Gavin
 2006 – Rebecca Fjelland Davis
 2007 – Bill Holm
 2008 – Vincent Wixon
 2009 – Mary Logue
 2010 – Kristin Cronn-Mills
 2011 – Rebecca Fjelland Davis
 2012 – Nicole Helget and Nate LeBoutillier
 2013 – Thomas Maltman
 2014 – Saara Myrene Raappana
 2015 – James A. Zarzana
 2016 – Christine Stewart-Núñez
 2017 – James Autio
 2018 – Geoff Herbach
 2019 – Megan Maynor
 2020 – Terri Michels
 2021 – Shannon Gibney
 2022 – Xavier Pastrano
 2023 – Lauren Carlson
 2024 – Anna Fitzer

2025 Keynote Presenter: Nick Northrup

Born and raised on the South Side of Minneapolis, SMSU alum Nick Northrup (Crowfather) has been rapping for nearly a decade, honing a unique storytelling style that draws from personal life experiences and carefully crafted cadences. Inspired to rap since the age of nine, Crowfather pursued a college education in writing to ensure he had a clear message to convey. It wasn't until therapy that he discovered the true story he wanted to tell.

Crowfather's music aims to be a source of solace and understanding, pulling back the curtain on cycles of generational trauma, inner demons, and the resilience that keeps us going.

Acknowledgments

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And, finally, to the young people of Southwest Minnesota, for their courage in sharing their words with the world.

