

CREATING SPACES

2023

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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2023 Cover Artist

This year's cover art is a digital photograph titled *Joy of Winter* by Ashley Niemeyer. Ashley is from Granite Falls, MN. At SMSU, she is majoring in Marketing and Accounting while also minoring in Digital Media Design. In her spare time she enjoys photography, dog sports, and working with dogs. After graduating, Ashley would like to work with a non-profit that supports and helps families.

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<p>Note to Readers: Some of the works in <i>Creating Spaces</i> may not be appropriate for a younger reading audience.</p>
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POETRY
Grades 3 & 4

Maggie Keller
Slayton, MN
1st Place

Beach

As I lay in the pale sand,
soft and cool on my skin,
the wind blows in gusts.
It wants to relax sometimes, too.
The sand seems like it's racing the air.
It's quiet
but not silent.
You can hear the waves rushing
and the faint sound of seagulls
screeching down the shore.
The ocean and sky mix
into a horizon that never ends.
This is peace.

Maggie Keller
Slayton, MN
2nd Place

Attack of the Seagulls

I don't know if you've experienced this,
but you know seagulls?
They're vicious!
Do you know what they do?
And I have experienced this.
They attack!
They swoop!
They peck!
Thirty at least!
They grab!
They chase!
They show no mercy
as they knock your ice cream
right off the cone
and into the sand.

Cassandra Scandrett
Slayton, MN
3rd Place

Paper in the Trash

I'm drawing a picture,
my pencil flows across the paper,
paper in the trash.

I try to erase, and it doesn't work,
paper in the trash.

I color outside the lines,
paper in the trash.

It doesn't look right,
paper in the trash.

By the end of the day, I'm going to have a full trashcan.

FICTION
Grades 3 & 4

Cassandra Scandrett
Slayton, MN
1st Place

All Because of Remy

“Ruff! Ruff! Ruff!” my dog Remy barks.

“Be quiet!” I whisper-yell. “Come on Remy, we can’t get caught in here!”

Hi. I probably should let you know who I am and where I am. My name is Kylee, and I’m on a plane with my dog Remy. It all started back at the extremely busy airport when my sister, Catherine, got back from college. While my brother and parents were greeting her, my dog, Remy, slipped out of his shiny, red collar and ran away to the closest gate where people get on the plane. He was my responsibility, so I slipped away after him without anyone noticing. Then, I saw a flash of black go through the plane door. I guess it was open because people were about to board. I snuck onto the plane. As I got on, I saw something black moving. Remy. I followed him as he dashed into the super stinky bathroom. As quick as a cheetah, I shut and locked the door. That’s how I got here.

“No, no, no,” I yelp as my ears start popping. “The plane is taking off!” I quickly pick up Remy and try to leave, but it’s too late. “What should we do Remy?” I exclaim! “I guess we should maybe see if there’s an open spot. Remy, you have to get into my sweatshirt!” I say in a low voice as I quickly pick him up so we can look. I quietly unlock the small bathroom door and peek around the corner. “We’re in luck,” I whisper. “There is a whole row open in the back.” I sit down casually on a sky-blue seat. I hear people talking in front of me, so I listen in.

“I can’t wait to arrive in Paris to see Bethany!” the girl with a streak of pink in her hair shouts excitedly.

“Paris?” I accidentally say out loud. The people in front don’t hear me though, thankfully. No, no, no, this is really bad. This means... Oh no! Please no! I look out the window to be sure. We’re going over the ocean! I know it’s kind of babyish for an 11-year-old to cry, but I did it anyway. I missed my family. Even my brother with smelly socks.

As we arrived in Paris, I thought of a way to contact my family. I would use the phone in the airport. When I got off the plane with Remy in my sweatshirt, I spotted the dull, gray phone. I quickly went to it and dialed my mom’s phone number. I forgot how my mom, dad, brother and sister must be worried sick about me. They probably went to the police and sent out a search party! When my mom answered the phone, I almost cried tears of joy. “Mom,” I say, excitedly, “I’ve missed you!”

“Where have you been, Kylee?” she starts. “I’ve been worried sick!”

“It’s a long story and I’ll tell you later, but I’m in Paris,” I reply.

“Kylee is in Paris!” I hear my mom tell my Dad.

“Paris!” I hear my dad scream.

“Mom, I am still here you know,” I say.

“Oh, sorry!” she says. “We have to figure out a way to get you home,” she tells me. “Also, where is Remy?” she asks, in a stern tone.

“Remy? Well, he’s kind of stuffed under my sweatshirt,” I reply.

“Young lady, are you telling me no one knows he’s with you?” This is my dad speaking now.

“Um...yeah,” I say quietly.

“Even though we miss you you’re still going to have BIG consequences,” he says.

“I kind of got that already,” I respond.

“We’re going to tell the police where you are. We will be there soon.”

“Okay, but I’m kind of scared. Also, what am I supposed to do until you get here?” I ask, worriedly.

“You’ll be okay. You need to stay at the airport because the police will know you’re there,” Dad answers.

“Okay,” I reply.

We say our goodbyes and hang up. I look around. I see gift shops, places to get food and much more. There is so much to see. I decide to buy some cute paper to write apology notes to my parents. I have a little money on me so I’m able to make the purchase.

“Remy, stop squirming,” I say. “You’re messing up my handwriting.”

After I finish the cards, I decide to just sit and wait. It is interesting to see all the different people. I see a man as skinny as a toothpick. I see conjoined twins who have black hair and brown eyes. I even see someone who has long enough hair to be Rapunzel! There was a small boy eating Cheerios out of a sandwich bag and he offered one to me! Other than looking at people I just wait. When I get hungry, I use the last of my money to buy some french fries. They are very filling, but I think they are the worst french fries I’ve ever had. I guess food from Paris doesn’t taste exactly like food from New York. After that, I fall asleep.

The next morning, I awake to an awful smell. I realize it is the present Remy left under my seat, but I get distracted because I hear my family coming. “Mom, Dad, Luke, Catherine!” I call. “I’ve missed you!”

“Kylee!” Mom and Dad exclaim in unison. “We’ve missed you, too!”

“I’m so happy you’re here!” I cry. “We can finally go back home,” I say, relieved. “Remy will be happy to have his dog bed back.”

“Wait, where is Remy?” Mom asks, curiously. We see a black flash going towards someone’s hotdog. We all know who that is!

“Remy!!!!”

Hugo Flohrs
Odin, MN
2nd Place

The Wild Dirt Bike

Once in the middle of the night a dirt bike started and rode around. Bobby heard it and ran outside; he saw it and chased after it. Once he was close enough, he jumped on it, then he looked up. “Ahh a tree!!!” Then he got knocked off by a branch. “What just happened? Where am I? My head hurts.”

The dirt bike didn't stop and rode through the fields to the neighbor's house. Then the dirt bike rode right through Billy's garage door. Then Billy woke up. “What was that?” He ran downstairs and into the garage. When Billy saw the dirt bike he tried to get on, but he fell off. He tried three more times, and then the dirt bike rode off.

Billy got on his bike and rode as fast as he could after the dirt bike. He rode until he finally stopped and said, “My legs hurt. I can't go on.” As he watched, the dirt bike rode right up to a grain bin. Billy was so confused he fainted and fell right to the ground.

When Billy woke up, the sun was just rising. The first thing he saw was a dirt bike on top of his bin. It all came back to him in a second. He thought to himself, “How am I going to get a dirt bike down from the top of my bin?”

Before he had time to answer himself, Bobby pulled up in his truck. He ran over and asked, “Are you okay, Billy?” All Billy could do was point up at the top of the bin. Bobby looked up and gasped, “How did it get up there? And how do we get it down?”

Then Billy came up with an idea, and he told Bobby, “I know; I will climb up the bin and scare the dirt bike off

while you stand at the bottom and try to get on the dirt bike when it jumps off the bin.”

Bobby thought it was a good idea, so he said, “Let’s try it. It can’t hurt to try.” Billy started to climb up the bin while Bobby stood there and waited for the dirt bike to jump off. Billy got almost to the top when he heard the dirt bike start, but instead of jumping down it jumped to the bin that was next to it. It stayed there until Bobby climbed up the other bin. Bobby scared the dirt bike off the bin, and it landed right next to Billy who was standing on the ground. Billy then got on the dirt bike and got it under control. Then Billy laid the dirt bike down on the ground.

When Bobby climbed down the bin, he said, “Good job Billy!”

Bobby said, “Do you want to keep the dirt bike?”

“No! That dirt bike is too dangerous. We should sell it!” said Billy.

Bobby and Billy sold the dirt bike for \$2,500, and with that money Billy bought a new dirt bike that he rode everywhere!

Bryce Metzger
Hills, MN
3rd Place

The Greatest Gift

Once upon a time there was a family: Fern (mom), Danny (dad), CJ, Penny, and Isabelle the children. They were triplets. Their parents went to war and died. The children lived with their Grandma Ruth. For the children's 10th birthdays, their Grandma Ruth gave them a magic teleportation machine that would let them go anywhere they wanted in the world. They also could go back in time. This is the story about one time when they got stuck and did not know how to get back home.

Introduction

At Grandma's house she went into the attic and pulled out a box that said "*mom and dad*" on it. "It's a teleportation machine. You can travel anywhere in the world or go back in time," said Grandma. "Your mom and dad found it in the war and had a friend send it to me. They told me to give it to you when you were ten."

They took the machine to try it out. "Be careful and you have to think about where you want to go," Grandma said, but they were gone in a flash. They went into their room and tried it out. They pushed a button, and they went spinning faster and faster until everything looked weird.

"Where are we," Penny asked.

"I don't know," said CJ.

"I read about this place," Isabelle said. "We are in Africa—in the Sahara desert."

"This place looks cool," said CJ.

"Hey, a lion," said Penny.

“What is it doing?” asked CJ.

“It's getting ready to pounce,” said Isabelle, “Oh no, look out! Here he comes. Run for your lives guys!”

“Ahh! Okay guys, we need something to feed him,” said Penny. “Hello, can I have meat? A lion is after us.”

“Okay—okay!” said Bill, the store owner.

“Here is the meat,” Penny said as she dropped it.

The lion sniffed it and took it.

“Bye bye lion,” Isabelle said. “Let's try the machine again, CJ.”

“Okay, let's press the button,” said CJ.

Off they went faster and faster until they arrived in a prehistoric land.

“Hey guys, a dinosaur!” said Isabelle as she ran away quickly.

Penny said, “I think he hurt his back. Look, it's a tree branch. Let's take it out of his back.” She paused to comfort the dinosaur. “It's okay big guy; we are going to take the tree branch out of your back.”

So they climbed onto his back and took the tree branch out.

“There you go, big guy,” Penny said.

“Hey, could you give us a ride?” said CJ. “I would like to see what it is like during dinosaur times.”

Surprisingly the dinosaur answered back, “Sure, let's go.”

“Everything far far far back looks pretty,” said Penny and Isabelle as they climbed off the dinosaur. “Thank you, dinosaur, for taking us.”

“Look,” CJ said, “a big mountain with red stuff in it.”

“CJ, that's a volcano and it's about to erupt,” said Penny. “Run like the wind everyone.”

“It will be fine,” said CJ.

“The hot lava is getting closer. Let’s get out of here,” said Isabelle before suggesting it was time to go somewhere else.

“Okay, let’s go.” So they pressed the button. They went spinning faster and faster until everything was cold.

“Are we in Antarctica?” asked Penny.

“I think so,” said Isabelle. “Well let’s explore before dinner.”

“Grandma will be done soon,” said Penny.

“Okay,” said CJ as he quickly looked around.

“We must be careful of ice chunks that will break off from land into the water. We don’t want to get separated from each other,” said Isabelle.

“Okay,” said CJ sadly. He really wanted to ride on an ice chunk.

“Hey, a polar bear and its cubs,” said Penny.

“Stay still, Penny; the mama bear might attack you,” said Isabelle.

“Hey, an ice chunk; can I ride?” CJ asked Isabelle.

“No, absolutely not! You will get separated from us.”

“I want to pet the cubs,” said Penny.

“No!” said Isabelle. “Do you want to be a bear’s dinner?”

Penny replied, “No.”

“Good,” said Isabelle, “now let’s go get CJ, who’s about to go on an ice chunk.”

“CJ get back here right now!”

“No,” CJ said.

“Well then, I’ll have to chase you. You are way faster than us, CJ,” said Isabelle and Penny together.

He got on the ice chunk and floated off away from the others. He had the machine, but he still didn’t quite know how to use it, so he paddled back to find his sisters. Where are they? he wondered.

Meanwhile the girls were trying to find CJ. They didn't know where they were going at all. CJ tried to use the machine, but he didn't know how to. He thought really hard of his sisters and pressed the button. Wow! He went right to them.

The girls asked, "How did you get back?"

"I used the teleportation machine."

"I don't know how I got here. Maybe we should go somewhere else," said Penny very coldly.

"Okay," everyone said in agreement.

"This will be our last place before we go home," said Isabelle.

So they pressed the button and went spinning and spinning, faster and faster until everything was hot.

"Ahhhhh! We're on an island," said Penny in shock.

"It feels nice here," said Isabelle, amazed. "Let's look for coconuts to crack open and drink the milk."

"That sounds great. Maybe this place isn't so bad after all," said Penny.

"That's the spirit Penny," said CJ.

"Let's go guys," said Isabelle.

They followed the trail. It was beautiful. They saw palm trees with coconuts on them and the beach with crabs on the sand. They tried to get the coconuts from the trees with the palm tree leaves, but they couldn't get them.

"How can we get them? Maybe we could travel to space and grab an alien that can float, and he could float up there and grab a coconut for me. I mean us," suggested CJ.

"That won't work," said Isabelle, "We can't breathe in space."

"That's right, we learned about that in science class," said CJ.

"So, what are we going to do?" said Penny.

“Let’s just move on and see if there are any lower palm trees,” said Isabelle.

“What do you even see on an island?” asked Penny.

“Palm trees, crabs, stuff,” said Isabelle.

“But what kind of stuff Isabelle, like a- a- a- CAVE?” CJ and Penny said together.

“I see one up ahead,” said Isabelle.

“Guys,” said CJ, “do you know anything about a volcano erupting right now?”

“It will be fine—wait, what? A volcano erupted. Get in the cave. Oh, now I see it. In the cave everyone. NOW!!!” said Isabelle.

“Oh no, the lava melted the rock down and we are trapped in this cave. Maybe the teleportation machine can get us out of here,” said CJ.

So, they pressed the button and went spinning faster and faster until they were in the same place.

“Why are we still here?” asked CJ.

“I don’t know,” said Penny.

“I think I know why we are still here,” said Isabelle. “Maybe because we are surrounded by rocks so we can’t get out.”

That is when the second volcano that we saw erupted.

“Grandma’s never going to believe us. Let’s explore the cave,” said Isabelle. “Then we had better figure out how to get home.”

So they kept moving on and what they did learn was there was a ghost who roamed the cave and also there was a big golden statue that would give you one wish—not two, not three—just one wish.

“Hey guys, I found a map,” said Penny.

She looked where the end of the cave was. But the map didn’t show the end of the cave, just a big statue and there was some writing on it.

Penny read what it said, "Beware of the ghost who lives in this cave. He will make you a ghost, too."

"I don't want to be a ghost," said the triplets all together in agreement.

"Well, if we are going to get out of here, I'm doing it," said Isabelle. "Okay let's do this everyone. Be very quiet in the cave then maybe the ghost won't notice us."

"Let's hurry, supper will be ready in fifty minutes," said CJ.

They marched along quietly so they would not be spotted by the ghost. They saw crystals on the walls of the cave. They saw a shadow in the distance.

"It must be the ghost," they all said at once.

But it wasn't. It was just the crystals making a shadow of a ghost so there was no ghost at all. They made it to the golden statue where they could make their one and only wish. They all wanted the same thing, to get back home to Grandma because they missed her very much.

So they went up to the statue and said, "We wish to go home."

They started to spin. They spun faster and faster until everything was still. Suddenly, Grandma peeked into their room to see what was going on. They all hugged her and said, "We missed you but had lots of fun. We want to go with you next time. It was fun. We saw two volcanoes erupt in one day. It was the coolest thing that happened today."

"Now, who's ready for supper," Grandma said.

"Me, me, me," they all responded.

They all lived happily ever after as they continued exploring the world and remembering their parents who gave them such a great gift.

POETRY
Grades 5 & 6

Emily Johnson
Bingham Lake, MN
1st Place

Willow Fountain

Standing proudly outside my house stood a willow tree,
a giant tree,
my hiding place,
a fountain of branches and leaves.
My willow tree stood waiting, watching,
protecting us from harm.
Clear waters,
mossy branches
sprouting from the middle
and flowing down the side.
The willow blowing in the wind,
growing every day,
the fountain flowing water,
both alive and free.

Lexie Overvaag
Luverne, MN
2nd Place

Break Down

We all break down sometimes,
We don't think we'll be fine.
Maybe nothing's going right today,
Or that boy's treating you the wrong way,
Or maybe you're so stressed that you can't think straight.
So just breathe and believe that you'll be okay,
Even if your skies are gray,
Just know that you're needed, so stay.
And just remember that the flowers will bloom someday
And just breathe through the pain.
It's not easy, but what is?
After a hard day at school
Maybe you're just not feeling cool.
Everyone's treating you like a fool,
But they're not,
Even if you don't feel so hot.
Just break down
And cool off
With a few tears.
Just break down
And pour out
All of your fears.
No one will mind
As you'll soon find,
Just break down
Like a car by the side of a road,
Just break down
Like a human with a heavy load,
Break down
Just break down.

Bobby Keller
Slayton, MN
3rd Place

Up & Down

Press the button and watch it light up.
Stare at the wall and wait for a while.
Thud! Ding! Doors whoosh open.
Press the button and wait some more.
Wait some more while doors whoosh shut.
Stare at the wall instead of the humans.
If you do look, just a quick glance.
Then back to the wall or the lit up buttons.
Thud! Ding! Whoosh! Wait.
Thud! Ding! Whoosh! Wait.
If you talk, keep it short and sweet.
Give a quick smile, then eyes back to the wall.
Manners are weird on an elevator.

FICTION
Grades 5 & 6

Riley Kesteloot
Cottonwood, MN
1st Place

096

John Azelart sits alone in an all-white room with a black table in the middle and a TV on the wall. The door handle rattles and a woman in a black suit walks into the room with a computer and some files in her hand. She must be the interviewer. “Did you catch it?” the scientist asks.

“Yes, Dr. Azelart. 096 is back in its holding cell.”

John releases a sigh of relief.

“John, I want to show you the video recording of when 096 broke out.” The scientist picks up a tiny remote. She clicks the button, and a recording starts. “It’s camera footage from outside of 096’s holding cell.” In the recording: two men in hazmat suits stand outside of a large metal box that says 096 on the right side.

“Subject appears on our monitors to be on the left wall of the cage,” the man standing closest to the cage says. All of a sudden, an angry roar comes from inside the cage and a large bang comes from the box. “What the heck is it...” he’s interrupted by a large hand that breaks out of the box. The hand tears through more metal and the creature jumps out.

“No, no, no!” says the man closest to the box. A large crack fills the room when the creature grabs the man and throws him across to the other side. The creature looks up at the camera.

John turns around and shields his eyes not wanting to see its face because it’s a well-known fact that even recordings and photos can trigger him.

“Don’t worry sir,” the woman says, “all camera footage of the creature has been filtered and its face blurred.”

John looks back up at the camera footage. And just like she said, the creature's face was blurred. The other man in the hazmat suit sees its face when he throws the other guy. He tries running away but when he looks back it jumps at him with so much force it breaks the camera. The video ends before we could see the scientist's fate.

John's face is priceless. "How could you let this happen?" John yells as his anger rises. "Why the heck would it just get angry and break out?"

The woman picks up the remote again and clicks it.

John looks up at the screen, scared of what it may show. It shows photos of a farm. "What does this have to do with any of this?" he says anxiously.

"After escaping the facility and running for three days, it arrived at its destination," the interviewer explains while looking at the screen.

"A farm?" John replies.

"Yes," the woman says. "Six hours ago, 096 arrived at this farm and...eliminated everyone there." She clicks another button on the remote. It shows a picture of scrambler goggles. (SCP equipment that scrambles 096's face when you wear them). "Project scramble," the woman says looking at John.

"Tell me how it works?" John looks at the photo on the TV, then back at the woman.

"Once the goggles calculate 096's face, it scrambles it out with black squares."

He replies, "Hmm."

She pulls up a suitcase and opens it. She takes the broken scrambler goggles out of the suitcase. "It's a shame they didn't work," she replies.

"What?" John says as he picks up the broken goggles.

"They worked on all of our tests."

He looks back up at the woman. She picks up the remote again. In the recording, it shows eight soldiers in black suits

armed with firearms. It shows the view from a camera that was attached to one of the soldier's scrambler goggles. In the recording, the eight men get out of the armored trucks a half a mile from the farm. "Okay everyone," one of the soldiers yells out loud. "Our mission is to find 096 and put a bag over his head so the retrievers cannot see his face. And let me tell you it's easier said than done. Jacob will be recording the whole time." He looks towards the camera. "Jacob, the camera on?"

"Yeah," a voice comes from behind the camera and a thumbs-up appears in front of it. "Let's get moving!" the man says.

The woman pauses the video. "The goggles," she gestures to the broken goggles on the table. "They're Jacob Brents, the guy who recorded it all." She un-pauses the video. She fast forwards just a little bit, so they don't have to watch the soldiers for ten minutes as they walk through the forest.

Finally, the soldiers arrive at the farm. Four soldiers search the barn while four search the house. Jacob goes with the group that searches the barn. As he walks around the lower part of the barn, he hears a whimpering sound coming from the corner. "Hey buddy," Jacob says aiming his firearm at the creature. The 096 is curled up in a ball crying. "I found 096," Jacob says into his intercom. "He's on the lower level of the barn, top left corner."

Seconds later soldiers rush over. One of them puts a bag over 096's face. They pull 096 outside where the four that searched the house are waiting for them.

"Okay," the soldier from earlier says "the retrievers will be arriving any minute."

As the soldiers in the recording wait for the helicopter to arrive, John looks back at the woman. "So if all the soldiers survive, why were Jacob's goggles broken?" he asks.

"The recording's not done yet," the woman replies.

He looks back up at the TV. The helicopter comes down. Wind whips all around them. The loud sounds and furious winds of the chopper make the scramble goggles start glitching. The bag over 096's face flies into the air. "Oh no!!!" says one of the helicopter pilots. She sees its face just as 096 lets out an ear smashing screech. It jumps 15 feet in the air. It smashes the cockpit of the helicopter.

"Viper one going down, repeat viper one going down, gaaah!" yells the pilot. The helicopter spins like a tornado till it explodes into the barn and wood flies everywhere. All the scrambler goggles shut down.

"Look away!" Jacob says, but it's too late. Only Jacob and one other man react quick enough. Jacob looks at the ground and shields his eyes as chaos breaks loose behind him. Gunfire, 096 screeching...and screaming...so much screaming.

"Make it stop, make it stop!!!" Jacob screams.

It stops. All the horror, all the chaos...stops. Jacob smacks his goggles wiggling them and shaking them until the status on top says "online."

The woman pauses the video.

"No," John says. "I still want to know why this happened!" he screams as he slams his fist on the table.

"Calm down, John," the woman says. "I'll tell you, okay?"

John unclenches his fist. "Alright," he says.

She pulls up a file and gives it to John. "That's why."

John picks up the file and opens it. There's a photo in a small yellow envelope. He slowly starts taking the photo out, but stops. "Ma'am, what am I looking at?"

"Don't worry, sir," she answers.

He pulls the photo out and looks at it. It shows a man in snow gear smiling at the camera. In the background there's scribble marks as if it's scribbled something out. "Who scribbled this out?" he asks.

"Jacob Brent, sir."

John sighs and looks back up at the TV. “Unpause it please,” he requests.

She picks up the remote and starts it.

Back in the recording, Jacob wiggles and knocks his goggles, and they turn back online. He looks around for other survivors but there’s only one left besides him. “Thanks for the warning,” then he looks around and realizes he’s the only one who heard it. Jacob’s goggles start flickering again. “My goggles aren’t working too well,” he says to the man. “Can you put the bag over 096’s face? I’ll wait in the barn.”

As the one soldier puts the bag over 096’s face, Jacob waits in the barn. Looking around, he finds a desk. He walks over to the desk and notices photos on it. Instantly his goggles start humming. He looks to see that the photos were taken on a mountain. One photo shows three men in snow gear climbing up a big slope of rock and ice. The next photo shows the three men next to a sign that says, “*Would you take an adventure of a lifetime?*” The background of the photo was Mount Everest. The last photo shows just one of the men. But in the background...way in the background, there was a small collection of pixels put together in an odd way. But when John and the woman look at the recording, they just see it blurred out. He could hear 096 getting slightly angrier by the second. He looks around and picks up a set of paint markers. “No, no, no!!” Jacob already knows he’s dead but he wants to scribble it out anyway so no more chaos would immerse from the photo.

By the time he scribbles out the collection of pixels it’s too late. He closes his eyes as 096 runs towards the barn. The recording ends and John is left in shock.

“The photo showed just less than four pixels of 096’s face,” the woman says.

John's face is terrified, then within a matter of seconds he is angry. "All this," John says with anger in his voice. "All this over three pixels! Three pixels!!!"

The woman pulls up a file. "In this file is a document," the woman says.

"For what?" John asks.

"To terminate 096."

John looks up at the woman, then looks back at the file. "To-to...terminate it?" John stutters with a smile slowly growing on his face. "You're offering me authorization to kill it?" He stares at the woman in the eyes.

"No John, we're giving you authorization to try," she says with a serious face. She stands up and grabs all of her files and the suitcase. "Have a nice rest of the day," she says as she walks out of the room.

"You, too," he says taking the papers out of the file and clicking his pen.

The woman walks down the hallway and enters a room where a man in a black suit is waiting for her. The room has gray concrete walls. There's a SCP symbol on the wall and a computer with camera monitors on the three big screens.

"How did it go?" the man asks her.

"Great," the woman says sarcastically. "I gave him the file, and he's signing right now." The screen in the middle of the three screens shows John in the room signing the papers.

"Do you think we should tell him we know he did it?" the man says, looking at the screen.

"No," the woman says. "Wait till he kills it." She sits down on a chair. "With all the people he caused to die," her face becomes serious, "he's more of a monster than he thinks we are."

Lexie Overvaag
Luverne, MN
2nd Place

The Pitter-Patter of Rain

The pitter-patter of rain occupied the young cat's focus as she gazed intently outside. She was a tortoiseshell with white paws, chest, and belly. Her bright gold eyes were round and flecked with black. Not quite a kitten anymore, she was certainly a sweet kitty, quite affectionate, cuddly, and playful as well. She was scared of many things, however, such as the grumpy old collie that lived across the street, wolves, bears, and other cats.

"Mali!" called her human mother from the kitchen. "Food's ready!"

Her ears perked as she leapt off the shelf and trotted down the hall, pausing in the doorway to swat at the hanging beaded strings that made up the door. Mali rubbed against Mom's leg briefly then feasted on the scrumptious tuna. She knew she was her mother's baby; 'Nothing but the best for her,' she had said.

Mom seemed jittery today though. She continuously peeked out the window and worriedly checked the door. Finally, the front door opened. Mali wandered down the entryway to check it out, the license on her pink collar jingling. After all, she *was* Mom's only protection. A man in a wheelchair sat there, his dark brown eyes sparkling as he stretched his arms out to the sides, his crisp camouflage jacket crinkling. The handle of a blue leash was wrapped around his calloused hand.

With a teary little gasp, Mom hugged him tightly and kissed him. Mali tilted her head gently. With a start, she recognized the smelly stink of *dog*. Her back arched, her

brown fur spiked, her pupils narrowed, and her tail puffed up as full as a feather duster. Assuming incorrectly that *he* was what was making the cat nervous, the man leaned down, reached out a hand, and crooned gently, “Here, kitty, kitty.”

Mali cautiously sniffed his hand. He smelled bitter, but underneath that unnatural layer of scent, there was a faint sweetness. She gave him a quick lick and raced into the living room. With a lot of chatter, Mom wheeled him (Mali decided to think of him as Dad) into the living room. Following obediently behind was a huge Belgian Malinois with only one haunted brown eye.

Mali watched from under the couch, her vision affected by the hanging ruffles on the sofa, while feet and wheels moved around and the dog settled down. The plush red and cream carpet molded itself to cushion each individual shape presented to it. Warily, the dog rested his nose on his paws as his ears twitched gently, listening carefully to everything happening around him.

“Grayson,” Dad ordered, “come.” A brown hand reached down and unhooked the leash from the dog’s collar. Grayson lay down again in a depressed manner. Despite herself, Mali began feeling sorry for him. Later that day, one of the neighbors, Minnie McSnider, visited with a basket of strawberry buns. Mali overheard them talking.

“This is so nice that Alan is back! Sad about the explosion though. What exactly happened?” Mrs. McSnider blathered.

Mom smiled gently. “Shrapnel to his spine. He’s paralyzed from the waist down. I’m just glad that my husband’s alive and home.”

Minnie heaved an over-dramatic sigh. “That’s too bad.” Her round face darkened. “I hope that Carl will be home soon. I miss my husband.” Abruptly, she glanced

disdainfully at Grayson. “How beastly!” she exclaimed as if she hadn’t seen him previously.

Mom knelt beside the silky dog and rubbed his neck, her blue skirt pooling around her on the floor. “Aw, he’s a big sweetheart.”

The neighbor sniffed. “Retired military dogs are so scarred. They even attack families in the night! They should always be euthanized.”

“That may be the case with some dogs, but not Grayson.” Standing, Mom placed her hands on her hips. “Thank you for the strawberry buns, but if you don’t mind, my husband and I need to talk,” she proclaimed coldly.

The next day Grayson was steadily settling into the house. He wandered outside through the newly-installed dog door and eventually decided to head into Mrs. McSnider’s treasured garden. Rows of peonies, roses, orchids, and tulips were lined up in the soil as tall and proud as soldiers. Grayson gazed at the options for a moment, sniffed the orchids, and began digging in the row of tulips. He sent dirt flying with such ferocity that Mrs. McSnider came running outside waving a spade in one hand and a dirty dish in the other. She had apparently been washing dishes and grabbed the small shovel on her way out the door.

“Hey! Hey, you dog!” she roared as she rushed towards him. Grayson barked sharply and bared his teeth threateningly. Minnie touched the ground briefly and rose with a garden hose in tow. She pressed the switch and water spurted out of the hose at Grayson. He nimbly dodged the stream and continued to burrow through the soil.

Tossing the hose aside, Minnie McSnider marched up to him, grabbed him by the collar, and yanked him away—or she tried to, at least. Barking, Grayson desperately attempted to finish his job, but Mrs. McSnider fell backward from all of

the exertion, her head pounding down onto the grass. “Ohhh,” she moaned.

A screen door slammed and Mom jogged down the steps, her long blonde hair flowing behind her. She hurried into the garden, latched the white gate behind her, and helped Minnie to her feet. “I am *extremely* sorry, Minnie. He’s still adjusting to this new life.”

With a glare at Grayson, Mrs. McSnider rubbed the dirt off her cheek. “Why in the world would your *dog*—” she spat, “be digging in my flower beds?!”

Mom laughed light-heartedly, “Hiding any contraband, Min? Grayson’s trained to find weapons and drugs!” She smiled, brushing some clumps of mud off Minnie’s shoulder.

The neighbor’s rosy cheeks flashed white as her face drained of all color. “You’re kidding me, right?”

Brow furrowed, Mom’s smile faded slightly. “Of course,” she confirmed hesitantly. Shaking away any suspicions, she took Minnie’s arm and began to lead her to her house. “Come, let me make you some tea...” Her voice droned out of hearing range as they strolled away. Grayson accompanied them at first, but then stopped, turned, and silently headed back to the flower bed. He continued to uncover a shiny metal object. About an hour later he sat beside his hole, panting and waiting for praise.

Mrs. McSnider whisked into her garden in a pleasurable mood until she spotted Grayson with her deadly secret out in the open. She gripped her spade and began shoveling dirt over the sleek steel object, ranting all the while. With a backwards glance, she lifted several tulip bulbs into the pocket of her jacket and shoved Grayson out of her garden. Her black hair was slick with sweat when she finally dragged him back to his house.

That night when her parents were asleep, Mali crept up to Grayson, who lay in a new dog bed. His single eye was open and staring ahead. The cat let out a soft sound, “*Mrrp?*”

“*Rff.*” He lifted his head and looked down at her curiously. It was quite a sight: a tiny brown feline with dainty white paws gazing up at the enormous black-and-brown canine with scars and fresh wounds slashed across his body.

Mali purred a quiet beckon and trotted over to the window—

crash

An almost silent noise sounded from the kitchen. Grayson’s ears pricked in that direction as he slowly rose to his feet. Mali crept behind him, cowering in between his legs. After shooting her a caring look, the dog slunk into the kitchen.

As Mali watched him go, her chest fur fluffing up to her chin, rough hands grabbed her sides, closing just behind her ribs in a cramped position. They lifted her up and stroked her gruffly as they settled her in the nook of black-clothed arms. Mali puffed up her chest, trying to appear bigger. She desperately clawed and scratched at the arms to no avail. Just as the intruder was about to exit the house through the window, a dark shape soared through the air.

Vicious teeth clamped down on the attacker’s arm. The figure cursed and dropped Mali, who scuttled under the couch. Grabbing Grayson’s jaws and forcing them open, the trespasser slipped a couple of flaky brown onion-like objects down the dog’s throat. After choking for a moment, Grayson regained his composure, knocked the intruder to the ground and snarled into her face.

Mom sprinted down the stairs, followed by Dad down the wheelchair ramp. Whipping the ski mask off the black-

clad invader's face, Mom gasped. Black hair splayed to the sides of a pale face. "Minnie?!"

Their neighbor groaned and thumped her head back down on the floor. She muttered several unrepeatable words and snarled, "That dang dog! He bit me! He should be euthanized for that!"

Dad struggled off his wheelchair to half-lay, half-sit on the ground as he petted and rubbed Grayson vigorously. "Good boy, good boy," he murmured over and over again.

"But *why*?!" demanded Mom, horror filling her gaze. Reluctantly, Mrs. McSnider held up a plastic bag filled with flower bulbs. Mom gasped again as realization flooded her deep blue eyes. "You poisoned Grayson's food! You-you-!"

"Naomi," Dad told Mom softly. "Get the phone." With quick fingers, he tied Grayson's leash around Mrs. McSnider's wrists.

With a dark satisfied look in her eyes, Minnie grinned. "It's a little late for him," she sneered. "I put it down his *throat*, too."

Dad's face paled. He scrambled toward the home phone, but Grayson barked and urged Dad to follow.

Mom re-entered the living room. "I called the police."

"Go with Grayson," Dad ordered with wide eyes. "Now!"

Mom rushed down the front steps and followed Grayson into Minnie's garden where the canine was already digging furiously. Sharp barks were emitted when he unearthed the shining silver gun in the dirt. Covering her mouth with one hand, she knelt and rubbed his neck.

Suddenly, Grayson coughed and whined, beginning to wheeze. The police arrived with flashing red and blue lights and screaming sirens.

"Officers!" Mom called, leading them into the garden. "If you look here, you'll find at least one gun in the beds,

probably more.” Leaving the police to find the guns, Mom loaded the animals into the Jeep Commander with Dad in the backseat, stroking Grayson. It all went by in a blur for Grayson. All he could think of was the searing pain in his stomach and how much it hurt to breathe.

Nervously lingering in the waiting room, Mom hugged her cat closely and kissed the little brown head. Every time a door opened, she brightened hopefully, only to be let down again.

Dr. Maggie entered the waiting room with a bright smile on her face. “Naomi? He’s going to be alright.” Mom heaved a sigh of relief and allowed the veterinarian to lead her into the exam room. Grayson lay on the table, hardly awake, and obviously exhausted.

Mali mewed quietly and scrambled out of Mom’s arms to leap onto the table. She rubbed against Grayson and purred soothingly. The vet spoke to the parents in a hushed voice. “The emetic got rid of most of the poison, but just to be sure, I gave him some activated charcoal to soak up the glycoside.”

To his delight, Mom scratched Grayson under the chin. “You poor thing. I can’t imagine what you must have gone through.”

Grayson was taken home as he seemed to have recovered. The entire drive, Mom was singing her favorite hymn, “All Creatures of Our God and King”.

“The vet said that only a teaspoon could have been deadly, much less the amount that Grayson was given. Therefore, I am thankful!”

Minnie McSnider faced serious charges. She was arrested for poisoning, breaking and entering, animal cruelty, attempted robbery, and dealing firearms. Apparently, she had changed her name five times and was actually Trina Tanner from Des Moines. How she ended up in Michigan was

unknown. In addition, there was no such person as ‘Carl McSnider’. He was simply a figment of her imagination.

After all the excitement, the entire family collapsed on the living room couch, where they fell asleep—all but Mali.

plink

plink

plink

The noise grew louder until it was a euphony of raindrops in a waterfall. Mali rubbed her head against Grayson’s shoulder affectionately, tail lifted high in happiness, and beckoned him with a *mrow*. He rose to his feet with a series of grunts and followed to stand beside her in front of the large glass window. Mali curled her tiny body into a ball and purred rapidly, her little snowy white throat vibrating. Outside, it was a cold October day, but here inside, curled up by the fireplace, they were warm. And they lay there, watching the sky’s tears stream down the window, listening to the pitter-patter of rain.

Paisley Bruns
Redwood Falls, MN
3rd Place

**How to Not Get Caught:
A Bad Boys Guide to Committing a Crime**

“His name’s Levi,” Joseph yelled to the police. My jaw dropped. “Joseph, we made a deal! You were supposed to tell him my name was *James!*” I shouted. Anger rippled in my skin.

“Get over here, boy!” the officer yelled.

I laughed. My crocs scraped against the old pavement as I turned around and sat on my bike. At full speed I peddled away; the officers’ yells were drowned out by sirens. *Sirens?! They’re on to me!* I thought in horror. I propelled my legs faster. Too fast. I hit a curb and face planted onto the cracked sidewalk. My vision went blurry as the sirens approached.

Blood spread across the gray cement. I used my hands to stand, my blood soaking into the ground.

Pause; you’re probably wondering how I got into this situation, aren’t you? Well, it was just a normal day for me and my two best friends: Joseph and Kaleb. It didn’t stay a normal day, though. We were riding our BMX bikes around town, doing stunts. We were being so stupid, because when we went into Walmart, we stole a few cans of spray paint and painted the walls of Walmart. Now the police were after us. And of course, Joseph ratted me out. We made a deal! I was James and he was Cameron. Kaleb was gonna be Ryan, but he ran off. For some reason, he is too chicken. This was mostly his idea. Well, it was mine actually. But he agreed. So

here I am, bleeding out onto the sidewalk because of a little shoplifting and vandalism.

Rule #1 on how to not get caught: Don't fall.

I heard the sirens a block away as I tried to push myself up. I couldn't and fell to the ground again. I couldn't hold in my cries, so I sobbed and let out a defeated yell. The officer was there then, but I couldn't see. He grabbed me from the ground, then he saw my injury. He grabbed his walkie-talkie. "We're gonna need an ambulance on Flower Drive, right on the corner by the old apartment building. We got a young boy bleeding out." He put the walkie-talkie down and basically held me in his arms. It was my face and head. A big crack ran through my scalp. And my whole face was scratched, including a bruised or broken nose.

A minute passed, then two. Then the ambulance arrived. I was put on a stretcher. I was still sobbing. "It's not that bad, I promise! Just let me go! I'm sorry, I'll pay for the spray paint and scrub the walls!" I sobbed.

It was that bad, but they didn't need to know that. I was in excruciating pain; it was unbearable. But my family couldn't afford an ambulance ride or medical treatment. But that leads into Rule #2 on how to not get caught: Don't overshare.

I kick and flail and cry, trying to get away. Blood seeped everywhere as doctors looked at me. "This kid is delusional," I heard one say. I continue to kick and scramble. They restrained me, using buckles to hold me onto the stretcher. I opened my eyes and looked out the open doors. Kaleb and Joseph were talking to the officer.

“Is he gonna be okay?” Joseph asked, getting handcuffed. He didn’t struggle, letting the officer handcuff him.

On the other hand, Kaleb was crying. “My parents are gonna kill me!” I know why he was saying that. His parents didn’t like him getting in trouble. They were probably gonna give him a horrible punishment. I would try to tell the officer that, but I couldn’t move. I felt everything go fuzzy, and I slowly closed my eyes.

When I woke, I was in a hospital room. I groaned, feeling a sharp pain in my head. It was stitches and staples. Joseph was sitting handcuffed next to me.

“JJ?” I said weakly.

“Hey, Levi. You’re okay. The surgery went well,” he muttered.

“SURGERY?!” I shouted, causing some nurses and doctors to come in.

“Yeah, just a few staples and stitches,” Joseph reassured me.

“Where’s my mom and dad?” I said.

“Right here,” my mom said.

I could tell by the look on her face she is going to lecture me. Rule #3, don’t let mom and dad find out.

Dang, I’m really disobeying my own rules.

“Levi Kennedy Smith, what were you thinking?! Why would you steal AND vandalize!?!?” my mom yelled. My eyes closed, my head pounded. I rolled my eyes through my eyelids, still seeing black. “Open your eyes,” my mom scolded. “I know you’re awake.”

I did so, letting the bright lights seep into my eyes. It took me a minute to adjust. I rubbed my eyes, shallowly stirring in breaths through my busted nose. “I’m sorry, Ma.”

I said in my most perfect, sorry voice. She gave me a pitiful look, as if feeling bad. Soon it switched to worry. “Please forgive me.” I whispered, trying not to laugh.

Rule #4, if your parents find out, make them feel bad for you. It always works for me.

I stood up suddenly, grabbing Joseph’s cuffed hands. “Come on.” I led him into the restroom. He gave me a confused look. I pulled him into the handicap stall, locking us both in. He tilted his head, cocking a brow. I giggled, grabbing a paperclip from the floor. His mouth crept into a smile. He knew now. He turned around, so I could see his hands that were behind his back. He smirked. “So we’re gonna break out of this joint?” he asked me, his head still tilted to the left.

I nodded, forgetting he couldn’t see me. I unfolded the paperclip, inserting it into the keyhole on his handcuffs. His body was bouncing, as he tried to contain his evil laugh. I rolled my eyes, carefully wiggling the paperclip around. I heard it click, and they came undone.

I watched his eyes fill with joy, his smile growing. Then, his realization hit. But it didn’t hit me. “How are we supposed to leave? You just had surgery? Where are we gonna go?” he asked, his happy eyes fading into worry and stress.

*Always worrying. He’s always worrying. That’s rule #5, in fact. Don’t overthink **anything**. Nothing at all. You just do it. Don’t think. That sounds stupid, but it’s true.*

I shrugged, trying my best not to worry. He sighed, upset. I frowned at him, hurriedly unlocking the stall. “Stop worrying.” I muttered to him, opening the bathroom door.

“Where are my clothes?” I asked, tugging on my hospital gown with an embarrassed look.

“In the room,” he whispered.

“I’ll go back in and say you’re in the bathroom and want to change.” He smiled at me. Before I could even reply, Joseph was whipping back into the room.

I stood there, glancing around. There were lots of people walking around. *These people could die today.* My thoughts were interrupted when he rushed back in, throwing my clothes into my arms. I wasn’t paying attention, so they hit my face harshly. I caught them before they fell onto the dirty floor. He chuckled and I blushed from embarrassment.

“Let’s go,” he scolded.”

“Hold on,” I said shallowly, interrupting his sentence. I ran into the bathroom, slamming myself against the wall. Why am I doing this? My head fell back as an uncontrollable fountain of tears rolled down my cheeks. I tried my best to stay quiet, but I couldn’t; loud sobs left my mouth.

I was paralyzed, sobbing harder and harder. My legs were going wobbly, and I gasped for air. Why am I crying? The door flew open; Joseph’s figure was visible. He ran over to me, concerned. I felt his hand grab me, letting me flop into his arms. He looked at me with confusion. At least he felt the same way I did. I didn’t know why I was crying.

Rule number #7, don’t do what I’m doing.

A few minutes passed and I had calmed down, wiping my eyes. “Levi? What was that about?” Joseph asked me.

“I don’t know.” I moved from his arms and into the stall, locking the door cowardly. I changed, pulling my gown over my head. I slipped into my shorts and into my bloody white shirt. I walked out, looking for Joseph. He was gone. I opened the door, searching for him.

He was waiting outside the bathroom. “Where did Kaleb go?” I asked.

“Oh, about that...” he trailed off. “He was taken to jail for fighting an officer,” he said.

“Oh.” I nodded and walked towards the door. He was next to me. “Shoot. Bikes!” I called out.

He just shook his head and kept walking. His eyes were filled with suspense. I noticed he was staring at something. A girl. From our grade. Melany. I giggled.

“Someone’s got a crush, huh?” I teased, pushing his shoulder.

His face was red. “Not true!” he sneered. Then we were outside. He walked towards the Walmart where our bikes were left.

I followed quickly, smiling. “Joseph! Yes! You’re so flipping smart!” I hopped on my bike. He got on his. The next step was to break Kaleb out of jail. Joseph nodded to me.

After a long ride, we made it. “We have money from selling candy,” Joseph said. He reached into his bag and pulled out \$576. “Let’s bail him out.”

We didn’t. We couldn’t. They wouldn’t let us. Now we’re walking out, staring at Kaleb. His eyes were filled with tears. I tried, at least. The whole world seemed to be swallowing me with guilt. I felt my stomach tighten as I began to cry. I tried not to, but when I closed my eyes, they started pouring down my face like a little cascading waterfall. I sighed, sniffing. Joseph was also crying, I could tell. But we didn’t say anything, just biked down the road. Our life was over, it felt as. Our parents were gonna kill me. I was losing hope. I heard something loud and abruptly I turned my head.

Sirens. All over. We were enclosed. I opened my eyes and looked around. My chest was moving at a rapid speed. My breath was shallow.

I can't give you any more steps. Because I failed all of them. I don't know how to not get caught. I'm not a bad boy, and I didn't even commit the crime right. This whole thing was a lie. I do have one last rule. #8, don't listen to my rules.

The story ends here. I hope you don't end up like me. Bye.

NONFICTION
Grades 5 & 6

Bobby Keller
Slayton, MN
1st Place

The Ice Cream Menace

“Two scoops. Chocolate brownie and vanilla, please,” I told the ice cream lady. I remembered our beach vacation last year, happily walking out of the shop holding my delicious ice cream cone, unaware of the lurking predators waiting for me. Suddenly a determined seagull had darted from the sky, spearing my cone and knocking my ice cream into the sand. The shock had been horrifying and tragic.

This year, my ice cream needed armor. I asked the lady to please put it in a cup with a lid to protect it.

On the way back to our towels, I thought I had outsmarted the seagulls. Smiling, I mischievously held out my cup and whispered, “Hey, birds!” The seagulls didn’t even notice. They continued on with their day.

Confident that I had won, I lifted up my ice cream cup victoriously and shouted, “Hey birds!” Instantly I regretted it.

At least 30 seagulls attacked! They flew at me from all directions, flapping, pecking, and screeching in my ears! Frantically, I sprinted away with nowhere to run but the ocean. So I ran into the surf, hoping the seagulls wouldn’t follow me...but they did... in an angry, gigantic, pecking, biting mob! I tripped over a big, sharp rock and splashed under the waves.

After that, my ice cream was lost to the ocean, but I think running from a huge seagull flock makes a pretty good story. From now on, however, I will be much more cautious and respectful toward seagulls when I have food.

Lexie Overvaag
Luverne, MN
2nd Place

Warriors

I am an artist and a writer, but *not* your typical twelve-year-old. In September of 2022, after years of sudden episodes of extreme nausea and vomiting which have caused me to miss enjoyable events and more, my mom and grandmother realized that I have Cyclic Vomiting Syndrome, also known as CVS. Basically, I get stomach migraines that result in several days of couch-ridden illness, the first day occupied by occasional throwing up. Lovely. This usually happens when I get extremely excited for something, and if I don't get sick a few days before the event, I do afterwards. It's not a pleasant experience, let me tell you that.

Generally, I obtain a sore throat either the night or day before I have an episode. I require a large amount of water during and after each one, and I never drink as much as I should anyway. One of my faults. Now that I know what has been causing these episodes, however, my mother and I can work to prevent future episodes.

I take daily supplements such as CoQ-10, as well as an allergy pill, since CVS can be triggered by allergies. Every night before bed, I perform my rabbit chores then take a relaxing bath or shower. I also take a little pink pill called Pepcid and one apple cider gummy. When an exciting event is coming up, I swallow a Dramamine, just in case.

A couple of years ago I was sick for multiple months, just lying there and watching *Full House* and eating Jello. I rarely exited the house, as I'd become overly nauseous. It turned out that I have many food allergies that I didn't know about, such as eggs and cane sugar, as well as the fact that I

couldn't eat fruit and sugar within four hours of each other. That causes them to ferment in my gut.

When my parents decided to take me to the doctor on one of the first days, it was very late on New Year's Eve, around 9:00 p.m. I was loaded into the car with my warm blanket, a green bowl, and a movie. I could hardly keep my eyes open. The ER was so busy; we would have had to wait hours to be seen by a doctor. To help with the nausea that I routinely felt, we later bought some small purple tins of peppermints, and also some mints called 'Tummy Soothers.'

My mom is doing a huge amount of research, checking out numerous books from the library. It warms my heart to think about how much effort she's put into helping me. I am thankful that I don't seem to get episodes before my plays and things, since I love acting. I am thankful for my family. I am thankful for Dramimine. Mom tells me that kids with CVS are called warriors. I don't feel like a warrior, really, but I guess it's true.

So here it is:

Fellow kids with Cyclic Vomiting Syndrome, you're not alone. Each of us is special, and I pray to God that every single one of us grows out of this horrible condition. We are all going through something unbelievably awful, and we can't say that we understand each other exactly, because our individual issues are different. But just remember that we are troopers. We are fighters. We are warriors.

Penni Moore
Hills, MN
3rd Place

My Hero

My grandpa has always been my inspiration. He was a kind and gentle soul. I loved him and he was my hero. When I was younger, he used to pick me up into the air, only to land me on his lap. He would set me down and let me watch *Pink Panther* with him for hours. His voice was full of kindness and everyone that knew him knew that he was a great man. He found himself a lovely wife and made sure that his family felt loved. He raised five amazing children, including my mom.

We had made so many memories together until we got the news. Since we lived hours away from him, it was impossibly sad not to go to him and hug him. Instead, we all cried together after learning he had cancer. It was awful. Imagine having a piece of your heart break away from the rest of your body. My hero, my inspiration, was sick and not getting any better. My whole family was hurting after knowing that our hero was going to have to fight. We visited often trying to keep our hopes up, but it just seemed impossible. He continued to fight; he was braver than all of us connected. To even think that I could lose him made me feel sick inside. Thinking about how I used to complain about going on that long drive makes me feel horrible. Months passed, and it seemed that he wasn't getting any better.

Another Christmas came and we all realized that it might be the last. Christmas at my grandpa's has always been fantastic. Bingo, presents, food, and family—it couldn't be the last one—but it was.

The day my grandpa died was the worst day of my life. I never even thought you could feel that bad. It was around noon when my mom was called by my aunt. It was during the final game in my basketball tournament. Just close your

eyes and imagine this scenario: losing the final game and then right after that not seeing your mom and just knowing something terrible has happened.

They didn't even have to tell me; all I had to do was look at my dad and I knew. I was already crying from losing my game, which is a result of my competitiveness. That is one of the traits I inherited from my grandpa. He was an athlete and taught me to treat every game like the championship. When we walked outside, I ran to my mom who was bawling. I hugged her and knew that whatever I was feeling she was feeling ten times worse. I had only had nine years with him, and I already knew what a hero he was but spending 40 some years of your life with my grandpa would have made me feel dead inside.

Yet, I say we should end this on a high note. My grandpa, John Miller, was a great man. He was athletic, kind, and smart. He loved all his family and greeted everyone with open arms. His friends and colleagues all had been taught a thing or two by my grandpa. He made everyone's lives better and was an inspiration to, not just me, but many of his friends and family. People who did not meet John were not as happy as the ones who did. That is the story of my one and only hero.

POETRY
Grades 7 & 8

Annie Scandrett
Slayton, MN
1st Place

The Tears of the Earth

As I gaze out the glass window and the raindrops plunge
from the sky,
I dream that each individual droplet is a tear of the earth.
But our world rightfully has a reason to cry,
considering what it sees day and night.

A forlorn, young girl crouched in the corner,
thick tears rolling down her red, splotchy face.
A widowed mother trying to maintain a large household,
secretly falling apart deep within.

Bullies shoving a young, helpless boy to the ground with a thud,
all the while convincing him he is nothing.
War and cruelty tearing the lives of many
impotent individuals to shreds,
while loved ones stand aside and watch, powerless.

But as the sun reappears from within the clouds,
and a colorful rainbow unfolds across the pale blue sky,
I begin to discern that amidst the earth's deep sorrow,
there is beauty and love that cannot be taken away.

Annie Scandrett
Slayton, MN
2nd Place

The Never Ending Cave

In a cave, chill creeping up my shoulders
Will I ever walk out?
Uncertainty lurking within the shadows...

Cold
Darkness
Fear
Will this ever end?
Silence
Goosebumps
Fear
How long will this go on?
Shadows
Night
Fear

Annie Scandrett
Slayton, MN
3rd Place

Be the Change

The emotion of anger, as dangerous as fire
Shattering our very world
Destroying countries, cities, families
Killing love and merriment

Be the one to make a change
Brave enough to rock the boat
Retrieve the broken pieces of the world
Place them back together, one by one

Turn our world from wrath to peace
From sorrow to joy
From discrimination to acceptance
Be the change

FICTION
Grades 7 & 8

Annie Scandrett
Slayton, MN
1st Place

Love Never Fails

I am Ling. I do not know my last name. The nursemaids found me on the steps of the Beijing Chinese Orphanage for Girls when I was just eighteen months old. I was holding a small slip of paper. The word “Ling” was written on it, so that was my name. The nursemaids took me inside of the orphanage and cleaned me up. They fed me milk from a bottle to nourish my weak body. I was put in the baby’s quarters and have been at the orphanage ever since.

Once I reached the age of eight, I had to start schooling. Ms. Ushi is gentle, patient, and kind and teaches us most subjects. Master Hua says that we must learn English, for someone from America could adopt us someday. I don’t see why it’s necessary, though. It’s not like anyone is going to want *me*, a small, quiet, twelve year old girl who can barely get by in school. Everyone always wants the adorable, energetic young girls who run up to you and give you a big hug. Well, at least this way I can stay with Susu. Susu and I have been best friends from the time I came to the orphanage as a baby. She is imaginative, smart, and pretty. Unlike me.

“Ling! Ling! It’s time for lunch,” Susu calls, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Huh?” I ask, confused.

“Lunch, it’s time to eat,” Susu replies.

“Oh, right, sorry! Coming,” I apologize. I get up off my bed and take Susu’s hand.

Let me describe the bedroom to you. It is filled with fifteen beds, a thin quilt folded at the end of each one. Between every two beds is a small shelf that holds our few

personal possessions such as my hairbrush, doll, and nightgown. My nightgown is hot pink with pictures of Hello Kitty all over it. I did *not* choose it! For goodness sake, I'm twelve years old! Hidden underneath it all is my small slip of paper, always reminding me that I am unwanted.

We walk into the large dining room and get in line for our food. When we get to the front, we each grab a plate and fork and let the cooks serve us some noodles, veggies and bread. After we get our food, we sit down at a round table next to some other girls our age. There is Kwong, a tall, cheerful girl who *cannot* stop talking; Mei, who has a sweet heart but is very shy; and several others. The cafeteria is fairly small, with only seven or eight tables being able to fit. It is painted a lime green, which makes me cringe every time I enter the room.

"I'm so excited for the new clothes that came! Ms. Ushi said that she would pass them out after lunch," Kwong says ecstatically.

"Oh, yeah! I forgot all about that," Mei exclaims.

"It'll be nice to finally have some new clothes. I'm getting bored of the clothes I have," I add. All girls in the orphanage have two pairs of everyday clothes, one nightgown, a light coat, and a hat. The pair of clothes that I'm wearing now is jeans with a puppy t-shirt, and my other pair of clothes is a sundress that has pink and purple polka-dots on it, but it's getting kind of small.

"Alright, children! It is time to pass out the new clothes," Master Hua calls.

"Yes! When I call your name, come up and pick one shirt and one pair of pants" Ms. Ushi explains in her sing-song voice.

"Oh, I hope I get to go up first!" Susu squeals.

Ms. Ushi announces, "Lin, Jun, Kwong, and Susu, you may come up first. Choose one pair of clothes and then you

may go to the courtyard for recess. If you wish to change beforehand you may.”

Susu jumps up and walks to the barrels of clothing. She pulls out a pair of gray leggings and a sweatshirt with the words ‘Pink’ written across the front. Kwong grabs some ripped jeans and a pink cheetah t-shirt.

“I hope there are still some cute clothes when we go up,” I say to Mei. Mei doesn’t pay any attention to me. Her eyes are focused on a sparkly purple skirt that’s draped over the rim of the barrel.

“Ling, Wen, Chang, and Ming Yue,” Ms. Ushi says, “You may come up and choose an outfit.”

I jump up from my seat and do a fast walk to the front of the room. I begin searching for a pair of clothes that suits me. I come across a knee-length baby blue skirt that I cannot take my eyes off of. I quickly snatch it and look for a shirt that matches it. Finally, after a minute or two, I find a pale pink t-shirt that has a heart on the front. *Perfect*, I think. I quickly jog back to the bedroom where I change into my cute, new clothes before going out to the courtyard to play hopscotch with Susu and the other girls.

When I get there, Susu has just finished drawing the hopscotch court with a piece of green chalk. We get into a line so that we can begin. Susu tosses a smooth, gray stone, and it lands on the seven. She swiftly hops over to the stone and picks it up. Then, she hops back. “Here, Ling,” she says, handing me the stone.

“Ling!” Ms. Ushi calls, shocking me enough that I drop the stone. “Master Hua would like to see you. Would you please come inside?”

My heart starts to pound as I make my way to the door. *What did I do?* I think to myself. Once I am inside, Ms. Ushi escorts me to the office.

“Ah, Ling,” Master Hua says when we enter. “Please have a seat.”

“Did I do something wrong?” I ask, a look of worry spreading across my face.

“No, no. I have something very important to tell you.” He signals with his hand for Ms. Ushi to leave.

“Ling, something very exciting has happened. You have been selected by a family for adoption! They live in America,” he says, handing me a photograph of a slim woman with dark brown hair, a man wearing jeans and a gray t-shirt, and a little boy who looks like an exact replica of the man. They are all standing together in front of a pale blue house.

My face squeezes into a tight position as I look from Master Hua to the picture. “But what about Susu?” I ask, my eyes welling with tears.

“This is what we’ve all been waiting for, for every one of you children. You are very lucky, Ling! If you are willing, the family will come to pick you up in January.”

“That’s only three months away!” I exclaim.

“Ling, I think this is best for you. This may be your only chance at adoption,” Master Hua replies, a little more sternly now. “You need to take this offer.”

I sniffle, tears cascading down my cheeks.

“Make the most of the next three months, Ling. You should look forward to when your new family comes.”

“Can I leave?” I ask quietly.

“Yes.”

I quickly walk out the door and back to the courtyard, my arms wrapped snugly around myself. Susu notices me and jogs over. “What’s wrong?” she asks, noticing my tearstained face.

I look down and grimace at the sight of my skirt. What seemed to be so beautiful earlier now reminded me of

nothing other than the blue house in that picture. Susu took my hand and led me to a corner where we sat down together on the concrete.

“I, I,” I stuttered.

“Go on,” Susu prodded.

“A family wants to adopt me,” I spit out. A smile breaks onto Susu’s face.

“That’s wonderful! But wait, why are you so sad?”

“Don’t you see? If I leave, I won’t be able to see you anymore!” I cry.

“Oh, yeah,” Susu replies, her smile quickly fading. “Maybe we could Facetime. Ooh, and maybe I could visit!” she said, her face starting to brighten. “You should go, Ling. It will be hard, but this is your chance,” Susu says, gently stroking my back.

“You sound like Master Hua,” I said, a small smile escaping my lips.

Susu throws her head back and laughs. “Let’s make the most of the time we do have. And when the time comes for you to go, we will find ways to communicate. Maybe we can email! I could use the computer that’s in the classroom!” Susu exclaims. “Come on.” She grabs me by the arm and leads me back over to where the girls are playing hopscotch.

The next few months fly by, and by the time January comes around, I almost forget about my new family. One day, Master Hua calls me into his office once again. “How’s your packing going?” he asks me.

“I don’t really have much to pack,” I respond, a small smile creeping up my face.

He lets out a hearty laugh. “Well, along with your own possessions, we’ll send you off with an extra pair of clothes for the journey.”

“Thank you.” My eyes start watering and I can sense tears coming on.

“Ling? What’s wrong?” Master Hua asks, looking concerned. “Is it about Susu, because we’ll find ways for you two to connect.”

“No, it’s not that.”

“Well then what?”

“It’s just, why did they choose me? None of the other girls get to go, so why me? I mean, I’m nothing,” I answer.

“Ling! You are very special. The other girls have a chance, too. You may not have noticed, but there has been an increase in adoptions lately. This family chose you because they think that you would be the perfect fit for their family. They want you to be a part of their lives!” Master Hua exclaims. “You must never forget that you are *very* special. Okay?” he begs, his eyes searching mine.

“Okay,” I whisper, thinking for the first time that maybe I really am special. Maybe it’s my heart that matters, not how I do in school or how I look.

The next week after doing some packing, I walk downstairs to the cafeteria for supper. We have Kung Pao Chicken. I sit with Susu and the others who all give me hugs and whisper words of love and comfort to me, for I am leaving the next day.

After we’re done eating, we go upstairs to get ready for bed. I put on my Hello Kitty pajamas (probably for the last time) and brush my teeth. Then I climb into bed and pull the checkered quilt up to my chin.

A few moments later, Susu tiptoes over to my bed, her feet causing the floorboards to creak. She climbs into bed beside me, covering herself with the quilt. We turn towards each other and whisper about the next day and what it will bring. When we finally fall asleep beside each other, I dream about my new family and the love we will all feel when we are together.

The next morning Susu helps me gather my things and put them into a small carpet bag that Ms. Ushi gave me. I take my clothes, hairbrush, and doll. When I come across the small slip of paper that has my name on it, I tear it up and throw it in the trash. I decide that never again will I think of myself as abandoned and unloved. Then, after throwing the paper away, I dress in my pale blue skirt (which I've come to love again) and my pink shirt.

Then, holding hands, Susu and I descend down the stairs together that lead to the lobby. Suddenly, Master Hua's office door opens and three people exit out. One is a slim woman with dark brown hair. Another is a man wearing jeans and a t-shirt. The last is a little boy who looks just like the man.

I turn and give Susu a hug and then, taking a deep breath, make the first step towards my new family. Before I can even take another, they rush forward to greet me. I am enveloped in a cozy group hug. *They really do love me*, I think. Suddenly I hear a small voice whisper in my ear, "I've always wanted a big sister."

Katie Johnson
Bingham Lake, MN
2nd Place

One Minute of My Life

My name is Conner Asherson, and I am thirteen years old. When I was seven, I fell out of a tree onto bare cement. I was rushed to the hospital, where they discovered I had a severe concussion. After I woke up, I was diagnosed with amnesia. Since the accident, I have never remembered any of my life before that...well, mostly. There is one minute that I can remember. One minute of my past has driven me for the last six years. This is the story of how that one minute of my life changed me forever.

A ringing bell pulls me from my dreams. My groggy mind slowly tries to make sense of what is happening around me. I realize that I am back in the orphanage; no matter how far I run in my dreams, I will always return to this prison. This place is not actually a prison. It's an orphanage, but it might as well be a prison. The headmistress here can make us do pretty much anything. All she has to do is threaten to send us to bed without supper, not let us see our siblings (if you have any), or extend school lessons. These threats don't work on me, though. I have tried countless times to escape from here, and every time, I have been caught. This is why I get dressed quickly and head downstairs to help make breakfast as part of my punishment.

As I make my way downstairs, I try to think of a new plan for escape. I need to think of a good plan that will get me out of here, but I fear I have already thought of them all.

I don't even know how. This girl that keeps showing up in my memory is why I am escaping. But how would I find this girl from my memory when I am free anyway? I start to get frustrated, so I do what I usually do when I need motivation. I take some deep breaths and replay the only memory I have. As the memory starts, a little girl with curly blond hair and a tan face comes into view. As a younger version of me looks up, a big red barn comes into view. A thick forest lies just beyond the barn, and above it, a cloudless sky. A bunch of windmills sits in the background, slowly turning. The girl slowly turns towards me and grins, and then suddenly, she starts rolling down the hill. I want to jump into the memory to discover more, but soon the memory ends, and my mind comes crashing into reality.

I wipe off the tears that are now streaming down my face. "*Why does none of this make sense,*" I think to myself. "*Why can't one time something just make sense, and I could actually understand it.*" Anger builds in me, and I want to cry out and scream, but I resist. I have learned resistance, patience, and self-control over these last six years, and I realize these valuable lessons have saved me more than once from more punishment. I am finally at the kitchen entrance, and as I walk into the kitchen, I am startled by a loud bang. I look to my right to see a girl standing right beside me. I stop straight in my tracks.

In front of me stands a girl, definitely the prettiest girl I have ever seen, though I only remember one girl in my memory (before the incident). She had beautiful chestnut hair against a pale peach face. Her scattered freckles accented her smile. The girl's eyes had the color of the bright blue sky halfway through the day. She smiles shyly at me.

"Hi, I'm Autumn."

"Conner," I said, sticking out my hand for her to shake it.

“Sorry to bother you, but would you mind helping me, please,” she asks politely in a honey-sweet, soft voice.

“Sure,” I reply. “What do you need help with?”

“Well, I am supposed to make the eggs for breakfast this morning, but I don’t know which pans to use, and then I dropped them all, trying to figure it out.” Her face flushes at this last part.

“Here,” I reply, taking the pot in her hand. Holding up the pot that is now in my hand and pointing to two other pots on the floor, I tell her, “Use this one and those other two.” I look sideways at her as I help her pick up the pots and show her how to make the eggs.

Soon I am telling her all about the orphanage and what to do and what not to do. As we talk, I discover that she had come to the orphanage a few days prior and was not told much about how things work here. The rest of the girls in her room weren’t much help either. Halfway through the conversation, I realize I don’t know why she is at the orphanage.

“Why did you come to the orphanage,” I ask, curious.

The smile that was once on her face vanishes. She turns away, tears gathering in her eyes.

“You don’t have to,” I stammer. “I didn’t mean—”

“No,” she says. After a second, she adds, “It is just still hard. But I want to tell you.” After a second, she adds, “I trust you.”

“A week ago, my parents left to go to a conference,” she began, her voice shaking. “My little brother Ethan and I were home alone that evening. Later that night, my parents still had not come back home, and I started to get worried. An hour or two later, the police knocked on my door. My legs shook as I opened the door. They asked me where my brother was, and I told them he was in bed. They sent me to get him so they could talk to us both. By the time I had

woken Ethan up, my mind was swimming with questions. I figured something had happened to my parents, but I had no idea what or how bad. So, Ethan and I stood on our doorstep while the police told us our parents' car had been hit by another car."

At this point, Autumn was sobbing so much that it took her a second to go on. "My brother didn't understand, and I was glad, but when he said he didn't understand, and the police explained further, it took all my strength not to punch the police in the gut." Autumn clenched her fists. "The police asked me if we had any close relatives, and I told them no. It was only after I heard one of them say something about an orphanage that I realized that we would probably have to be sent to one." She sighed, "I could barely think clearly. But thankfully, I still came up with a lie. I told them my older brother had just graduated college and was at home with us. I don't actually have an older brother, so I don't know how my bluff even worked. They asked me where he was, and I said he was in bed sick. The police said they would return to work things out in the morning. So that night, we fled. I had no idea where to go except not here. They found us two days later. I was sent here, and my brother was sent somewhere else."

Autumn puts her face in her hands and cries. Unsure of what to do, I continue making breakfast. A couple of minutes later, Autumn starts helping me crack the eggs.

With tears still in her eyes, she says, "How long have you been here?"

"Six years," I reply with a sigh. I give her a run through of my history and how I am trying to find this girl in my memory. After I finished, she asked me to describe the memory, specifically the girl. I give her a detailed description, and she looks at me the whole time, especially at my face.

“Have you ever considered that she could be your sister?” Autumn asks.

I freeze. I have never considered it, but it makes sense. Just like me, this girl has blond hair, a pale face, a few freckles, and some of the same facial features. My mind is racing now. I am struggling to figure out how I did not realize this before or if it is even possible. I technically don’t know for sure, but it feels right in my head.

“Okay, that was just a possibility; we don’t know anything for sure,” Autumn says. “It just sounds like she looks a lot like you, you know.” She continues, “She could be a cousin or distant relative. She might not even be related to you. Maybe...”

“No,” I cut in. “She is definitely my sister. It feels right. I just know it somehow.”

“Yeah, I figured, too. I was just trying not to freak you out as much,” Autumn said quietly. Then she asked the question that I had been trying to figure out. “What do we do now?”

This giant bombshell has left my mind spinning, and honestly, I can’t think of much. I have still barely moved since this new realization. “I don’t know,” is all I got.

“Well, we need to escape so we can find her. She will probably be at another orphanage since you were sent to an orphanage. I believe there are only three orphanages in town, so she has to be in one of them.”

My heart lightens. We can probably find her soon. Now that my mind is clearer, I join in the brain-storming. And by the time we have finished making breakfast, we have a solid plan. If all goes well, we will be free by midnight tonight.

“Beep! Beep! Beep!”

I can hear the truck backing up before I even get into position outside. I climb into the bushes and scan my surroundings. The truck driver gets out of his truck and starts unloading boxes filled with food. The headmistress comes out to make sure he is unloading the right amount of boxes. Just as he is about to finish, one of the orphanage boys comes outside and starts yelling at the headmistress about something.

“Perfect,” I whisper to myself. This is the diversion Autumn and I are using to get the headmistress away from the truck when it pulls away. The boy is now talking about an orphan collapsing and unconscious. Of course, none of that happened, but the headmistress buys it anyway.

“Go ahead and finish up here,” she tells the driver, and she runs inside to the commotion.

The truck driver finishes unloading boxes and starts counting them. As he finishes up, he checks things off his clipboard. He starts closing up the back of the truck.

“*I am almost free,*” I think to myself. As I get ready to run to the back of the truck, I realize Autumn is not out here yet. She was supposed to be here a few minutes ago. My mind is racing now. “*Do something!*” it yells at me. So, trying to stall for time, I get up and walk out of my hiding spot.

“Hey,” I call out. The driver turns to face me. “You didn’t count the boxes right.”

“Yes, I did, and are you even supposed to be out here?” he replies in a gruff voice.

“I am allowed outside if I have all my schoolwork done,” I lie. “And no, you didn’t count them right. Or at least I think you didn’t count them right. But I figured I should warn you since you could get fired if you get it wrong. I have no idea if this guy will buy what I’m saying, but apparently, he takes my warning seriously.”

“I will double-check. Thanks, kid.”

“No problem.”

I realize this is probably my cue to walk away, so I turn around and slowly walk around the building to wait. I wonder what is taking Autumn so long. She is supposed to be sneaking into the headmistress’s office to get our files, so they don’t have proof against us, but I am starting to think she got caught while trying to. Suddenly I feel hands on my shoulders. “*Oh no,*” I think. “*I am caught.*” But thankfully, when I turn around, Autumn is there with a huge grin.

“I got the files and found a bag of money, too,” she tells me proudly.

“Nice job,” I tell her, then, notice the driver has recounted the boxes and is now heading to the driver’s seat. “Let’s go!” I tell her.

As we both grab onto the handle at the back of the truck and ride out of the orphanage, my heart fills with hope.

We are free. Free of the orphanage and the bonds that it kept us in. These thoughts have been echoing in my head for the past three days as Autumn and I have wandered the streets. These past few days have been more challenging than expected. We have had to find food and shelter while avoiding people looking for us, especially the police. They have been searching for us for the last few days, despite our hope that they wouldn’t because we stole our files. The police have been crawling all over, and they are getting harder to avoid, especially since we are also trying to find the other orphanages here. So far, we have only found one orphanage, and there was no luck there. We also realized that we couldn’t walk up and ask if we could look at all the orphans and see if we could recognize them. The last time didn’t go well, but this time Autumn and I worked out a plan

so we could see all the orphans and look at them. We split up this morning to find what we needed, and we were supposed to meet at a secret place, but Autumn hasn't shown up yet. I start to worry, and just when I am about to find her, she walks towards me with her arms full of stuff.

"Where were you?" I demand. "I was about to come and find you. We were supposed to meet half an hour ago."

"I know," she replies. "But I saw the cops close by, and I had to take cover until they were gone. But at least I found some good things," she says, smiling, holding up her arms which were indeed filled with many things. I examine the things she holds: clothes, a purse, a hat, some new shoes, and lots of makeup.

"What is the makeup for?" I ask. I wonder how she could be so careless with the little money we have.

"They recognized us at the last orphanage from the pictures in the paper. But if I put on a bunch of makeup, they won't recognize me."

I figure that's a fair point, but I still have one more question. "What about me? Won't they recognize me?"

She silently pulls a wig and a fake mustache out of her new purse. Apparently, she had thought this through more than I had. It is good to have her with me; otherwise, I would have already been back at the orphanage. But for some reason, I find myself angry that I need her. I am supposed to be able to do this on my own. I feel as if she stabbed my pride.

"We don't need that stuff!" I huff at her. "We would have been fine without it!"

"We do need this stuff, and you know it," she throws back at me. After a few seconds, she adds, "Just because you are frustrated with me doesn't mean you should be like this. I will meet you here in an hour." She avoids looking at me as she picks up the stuff she needs and walks away.

I don't know how long I stood there looking like a fool. The problem is that Autumn is right. I have been so frustrated lately because we haven't found my sister yet. Guilty and ashamed, I put on my full disguise. After I round up all my stuff, I put them in a bag and wait for Autumn. She shows up pretty quickly, and we set off to the orphanage.

"Listen, Autumn," I start, knowing I owe her an apology. "I feel bad about—"

"It's okay. For now, let's just focus on getting your sister back."

As we approach the orphanage, Autumn grabs my hand. I know that this is part of the act, but I feel my face going red anyway. As we walk through the gates, we try to do our best to look like a young couple. We are immediately ushered to the headmistress's office. Autumn and I are silent the whole time. The man that is escorting us stops at the end of a hall to show we are at our destination. He opens the door and sends us in.

My eyes gaze around the room as I walk in. It's a good-sized room with bookshelves on three walls and a large window on the fourth. On that wall, a massive window overlooks the courtyard and the front gate in front of the building. A small armchair and coffee table sit off to the right in front of a blazing fireplace that looks like it was shoved into the middle of the bookshelves. The fire calms as I turn my gaze towards it as if the fire wants to tell me I am safe here. It gives me the courage to turn my eyes to the long desk made of polished wood right in front of the window. Although many things perch on the desk, it somehow looks neat and organized. As I tilt my eyes up just a bit, I catch my first glance of the headmistress. She seems tall and a little skinny. Her wavy chestnut hair hangs down on her shoulders. Her face looks kind and gentle. She is definitely different from what I expected.

“Please come in,” she tells us gently. Still clutching Autumn’s hand, I walk into the room, pulling her with me. As we take a seat, she prompts, “Now, what can I do for you today?”

Autumn looks at me to take the lead. *Okay, here it goes*, I mentally think. “I am Jonah Willians, and this is my wife, Sarah. We are looking to adopt a child, and we were wondering if we could look at the children you have here to see if any catch our attention.”

The headmistress’s smile is huge. “That is wonderful. We have been looking for couples that would suit our children here, and I believe you fill that description. I would normally take you to the children, but unfortunately, I have another matter to attend to. Greg will escort you instead. You take as much time as you need. Oh, and don’t be afraid to ask for time alone with some of the children. It is good that you get to know them personally a little bit. Any questions?”

Autumn speaks up, “No, thank you. You have been very kind.”

As we walk down a lit hallway, Autumn mouths words at me. “*That was easy*,” she says while raising her eyebrows.

“*I know. I just hope this next part will be*,” I respond.

“All the children should be in here,” Greg informs us that we have reached our destination.

“Thank you, sir,” I respond politely.

He opens a door, lets us walk in, and then closes it behind him. Autumn and I survey the room. By now, all the children have noticed us and stood up so we can see them. Suddenly Autumn gasps, runs over to one of the younger boys, and hugs him. The boy hugs her back. Confused, I walk over to them.

Autumn looks at me and whispers, “It’s Ethan. I didn’t say anything about finding him because I didn’t want to get

my hopes up. You better see if your sister is here so we can get out of here quickly.

I nod. Clearing my throat, I stand up and address the children still standing there. “Is there an Emily Asherson here?” I ask nervously.

A small girl, probably about ten, emerges from behind the crowd. “I am Emily Asherson,” she replies timidly.

I just stand there staring at her. *Finally!* Finally, what I have been looking for, for what feels like my whole life, is right in front of me. “Emily, it’s me. Your brother. Connor Asherson.”

Emily stands there and studies me. She takes one step closer. I pull my disguise off to reveal my appearance. Suddenly Emily’s face lights up, and she runs into my now open arms.

“It’s really you?” she asks.

I nod, too happy to respond. “Come on,” I say to Emily, Autumn, and Ethan after a second. “Let’s get out of here.”

“We can climb out of the window,” Emily tells me.

“Okay then, let’s go,” I reply. “Let’s go live our own lives. Free.”

Ezra Petersen
Mountain Lake, MN
3rd Place

A Ceaseless Rain

Have you ever felt stuck in a ceaseless rain, cemented to the agony, corruption, and hopelessness of our miserable world, trying to trudge through the storm, only to find a selfish, heartless society revolving around barbarous limitations? A foreign concept to some, but to a poor, shaggy-haired British orphan stained by the brutal touch of his harsh culture, this concept seemed not far from reality.

Mason, the abandoned orphan, appeared to be deserted in the storm as he plodded through the rain. He previously held the last name Jones but is now merely considered Mason the Hapless. However, Mason's misfortune had not always been, but rather it began in 1951 during the heat of the British bombings. As one of the last bombs fell, Mason, only two at the time, sat in the rubble with his parents' bodies beside him. He grew up on the streets, hapless. He sat in the rain, soaked and stained by the blood of his parents and the brutal touch of this world.

"Another rainy day there, mate," called a man walking towards him with a grin. "You have any spare change there?"

"No, sir, nothing spare, all needed," Mason quickly replied while packing up his few things. Mason knew this man was dangerous.

"Mason the Hapless, you scrawny child might as well die. Whatever way you go, it will be better than this." The dangerous man sneered as he crammed Mason into a wall. "You can't defend yourself or your family. Never did, never

will.” The man reached into Mason’s pocket to find three pence that he swiftly settled into his own.

“Get away from him, rat!” called a young boy, and the evil man scurried away.

“Grayson, I am so grateful for your arrival! It could not have been better timing!” Mason expressed with an astonished look and a grateful smile because that boy was Grayson, Mason’s dearest friend.

“How can you laugh when you were just robbed? Let us go to my home and get you cleaned up.” The two paced down the lane, trying to escape the storm.

“Another rainy day,” called Mrs. Evans, Grayson’s mother, in a melancholy tone as the two arrived. “It’s been pouring for three days now!” she proclaimed. Mrs. Evans scowled and continued washing the dishes.

“Yes, ma’am, I can see that,” replied Mason standing in a pool of rain, holding a meager smirk on his bony face like a wet dog thrown onto the streets. To some, Mason was a dog on the streets with nobody beside him, dirty, wet, and not even deserving a morsel of scarce food.

“Oh, Mum, it seems we’ve been in the middle of a wretched storm since the last bombing,” Grayson burst out.

“Well, yes, it seems we have. I cannot stand this pain and sorrow! The bombings were twelve years ago, yet we still are not back on our feet,” his mother replied, setting her sponge down as she sympathetically glanced at the pallid child in front of her. “Oh, Mason, I did not mean that in jest, for I have just learned of your arrival. Let’s get you cleaned up. Would you like some tea on this brisk morning or perhaps some bread?”

But before Mason could reply, a voice boomed on the radio. “Another rainy day, England, but that’s beside the point. The votes are in, and I am happy to announce that

George Arthur is our new Prime Minister. Here he is now to present his speech.”

“Thank you, sir, and thank you to all who voted. I am here to say one thing and one thing only. It is time for a **change** (cough), **the** (cough) sadness will no longer **reign over our kingdom** (cough). Thank you, everyone. It was great **meeting** (cough) you. I will be in the office **tomorrow** (cough). And I will present a new speech **in London** (cough). Once again, thank you, and excuse my cough,” proclaimed George, coughing between certain words.

“George Arthur, a great man. Anyway, what did you say you wanted, Mason?” Mrs. Evans asked again.

“Change the reign over our kingdom. Meeting tomorrow in London,” Mason muttered with a blank look on his face.

“Sounds like an adventure to me!” announced a young girl with a pristine-looking coat and an umbrella over her blonde head.

“Amelia!” shouted Grayson and Mason in unison. Amelia is a good friend and sister figure in the boys’ lives who has moved away for a great sum of years.

“Another rainy day, I see,” Amelia commented as she set down her umbrella. “Anyway, what in the great cup of tea were you talking about when I arrived in this pleasant home?”

“Well, the Prime Minister was just elected, and he seems awfully odd. He coughed after, let’s say, suspicious words. That is, or he possesses a deplorable cough,” Mason replied with a concerned look on his face.

“Don’t be silly, Mason. George Arthur is a great man. Why are you so suspicious of a man wanting peace for our country? He isn’t the King, so stop spreading mindless rumors. What do you know about politics? You’re just a child imagining a fairy tale, pretending everything is some

conspiracy theory!” Amelia harshly fought back because her father was a politician himself.

“Well then, I see this is a sensitive topic. I am sure Mason was not serious, right?” Grayson hesitantly remarked, trying to settle this argument.

“I must get on my way,” Mason quietly voiced, clearly hurt by Amelia.

“The storm has not passed, and you have not eaten,” Mrs. Evans responded, concerned.

“Yes, the storm has not passed. In fact, it is just stirring. Britain will always have another rainy day if someone does not do something about this tragedy, but I see the sunshine, I see the day, and if I shall die in the storm in the hopes for the light to be revealed and clouds pulled back to expose the heavens, I shall be pleased. Good day,” Mason stated as he shut the door and confidently strutted into the storm.

“Such a poetic, young boy.” Mrs. Evans said with a smile on her face as she went back to cleaning her lovely home.

Months passed, the storm continued, and the Prime Minister spoke again and again. Anytime he heard the news of a speech, Mason made sure to sneak by a radio. He took note of any suspicions. Suspicions there were. That wretched George Arthur was not an ordinary man but an evil man with such despicable plans of corruption and despair. But to most, this was far from the truth. The Prime Minister would give his usual speeches, and they were wonderful! He spoke of rebuilding the bombed-out country, having peace, prosperity, and thriving. The people wanted change. They wanted the sun. They wanted the storm to end. George promised the end of the storm and a start of a new world because of his doings. Regrettably, this hopeful end to the storm is all but a lie. To most, a hidden secret, but to Mason, a plan in plain sight.

Mason never received the privilege of education, yet somehow he carried a brilliant mind. Mason the Hapless is more accurately Mason the Brilliant, the Logical, the Methodical, the Solver, or the Discerner. In every speech, Mason noticed every hesitation, every repetition, and every interruption, making methodical lists of clever speculations. It soon became a map, or more so a forecast of the storm ahead, and Mason knew he had to stop it. Storms came, and rains fell, but Mason's heart burned like a fire. But does the fire overcome the rain or the other way around? Perhaps all you need is an—

“Umbrella?” called a lady across the street when she saw the boy running in the rain.

“No, Madam. Thank you, Madam,” Mason replied in a rush to Grayson's house.

When he arrived at Grayson's home, he burst through the door, not knowing that Grayson stood before the door. Overtaken by the lack of oxygen, Mason gasped, “The Prime Minister, he is a liar, a fraud. You must believe me.”

Grayson was now also drenched because of the sudden incoming of Mason, but he patiently listened. “Have you heard the radio? He speaks in code, secret messages highlighting plans, meetings, secrets, and spies! Though these are not your average puzzles, he speaks metaphor, in morse code, in mathematical terms, and ancient coding techniques, but all of you are too dumb to see it!” The house fell silent. At the time of his arrival, Mason had not known that the entire Evans family had the Harris family, Amelia's family, for a formal supper. Mason's cheeks became red in embarrassment. “Excuse me, I should get going, and I am sorry for my rude interruption.”

“Amelia and Mason, let us come over here,” Grayson politely offered to the two. “I know we have different opinions, but Mason is right. Something is going on here.”

“But why must *we* solve this mystery!?” cried Amelia in a pouty tone.

“Then who will!? Are you okay knowing that you have no say in this world? Are you fine being a pawn for a group to move, mold, and choose the outcomes of everything around us? You say you are fine dying, knowing nothing in this world was because of you, but from a secret society planning everything, deciding everything, and choosing everything without a single person ever suspecting this corruption because it is hidden? Because we did not do anything,” Mason protested with passion flowing through his thin bones.

“I see I have been proven wrong, so what’s next,” Amelia arrogantly admitted.

The three then sat huddled together, planning, deciding, and choosing the outcome of this storm. Having decoded every speech, Mason knew the next meeting would be held just a town over in Bristol at midnight. The children decided it would be best to leave precisely at 8:00 P.M. and sneak on a train heading that way.

So, when the dinner ended, Amelia rode home in her family’s carriage, Mason walked “home” in the rain with his mangled shoes, and Grayson snuggled up in his bed. Yet none of them slept. Amelia with the warmth of luxurious blankets and a warm fire, Grayson with the warmth of his mother’s quilt, and Mason with the heat of his fiery passion. But right when the three began to drift into sleep, the 8:00 o’clock bell rang with passion, with freedom, with strength.

Three shadows arrived in the storm in the dead of night as rain continued to fall. There rested a lonely train and several sleepy workers. It was not a difficult task boarding the train but a battle for the mind. The three overflowed with doubts, and uncertainty oozed out of them. Shortly, however, the train plodded through the storm arriving at Bristol three

hours later. The three hopped off the train discreetly so that no one would see them. Sadly, their meticulous plan did not account for a massive guard dog.

“Woof! Woof!” barked the ferocious dog. The muscular dog sat chained to a post towering over a dark alley. The relieved children snuck past the dog, eyeing it every step. But just as the three precariously evaded the beast, the sky thundered, the children winced, and the chains came undone!

Now the three began a sprint, with the beast mere inches behind them. Rain splat on their faces as they ran and ran, but hope dissipated when a dead end neared. Their backs faced the alley’s cold, stone wall with fear as the vehement dog approached. Miraculously the three noticed a small door on the wall and began to bang on it rapidly. Suddenly, it gave way, and a large man towered over them in the doorway as a baseball bat fell on each of them with a bang.

“Three intruders, eh!” called a scrawny man as light flooded into their eyes. “Bring ‘em to the boss. He’ll deal with them.”

“The boss has a meeting with the President of China, ya dimwit,” growled the man’s low voice in the doorway. “Put ‘em in the cages,” he ordered, and the three were brought away.

“What shall we do in this predicament? I knew we should never have come!” Amelia complained with her hands tied.

“Yes, but it appears we are in the right place. And, these knots were tied by *dimwits*. Our hands will be free in a jiffy,” whispered Mason. Mason speedily untied the knots and moved onto the cage. With beginner lock-picking techniques, Mason successfully freed his friends but had not yet freed the world from the grasp of corruption.

The three scurried around a lonely warehouse, hiding behind anything they could find. Shortly, they discovered an

open room and heard murmurs coming from a round table. At the table sat the President of China, the U.S.A, Russia, Japan, Germany, India, and the list goes on, but in the middle sat George Arthur. The three moved further in to listen to what the meeting was about. They caught the words: bomb, kill, destroy, rule, everything.

“We must alert the authorities of this madness! They are controlling us. For goodness sake, they are plotting to enslave all of us to their ruthless acts! They are going to kill us! I’m getting the police—” Grayson said in a fury.

“Grayson, don’t you see these are the police! There is no hope left, there is no end, and there is no sunshine. This rain will continue, the storm will never end, the bomb has landed, our world is lost, it is corrupt,” cried Mason, with tears flowing down his face like the storm that raged outside. It appeared the fire had gone out. The storm had won. The water would always beat the fire.

“Corrupt?” called a cruel voice in the shadows. “What is corrupt, little child? How did you sneak past our guards?” leered the figure emerging from the shadows. The shadow emerged, and there stood George Arthur with an unimaginably horrid grin across his disgusting face. Mason stood shocked and hopeless. “What is your name, scrawny child?”

“Mason. Mason Jones.” Mason said in a shaky voice. The room became silent, and George looked aghast.

“I had a boy named Mason, too.” George trembled. “His mother died in a bombing, and he has not been found since. He is said to be dead, but I expect him to one day find me.”

“My mother and father died in the bombings, too.”

“In 1951, my child was only two at the time, but he was stripped away from me by disorganized leadership, a government full of war and corruption. I stand today to stop this corruption and become the government.”

“In 1951, my parents were stripped away from me when I was only two years of age,” Mason replied, awestruck by this coincidence.

“I knew you would find me. I knew this day would come!” George proclaimed as he placed Mason against his chest and embraced him with all his might. “Leaders, my son Mason has returned to fight with us!”

The room erupted with cheers and salutes to their master.

“Mason! He is the man that we are trying to stop! He surely is not your dad. You just met him! Don’t let it get in your head!” Amelia called with terror.

For once, Mason was satisfied. He had never had a hug, never had a father, never had love. Mason’s storm ended, or so he believed. Perhaps this was just the eye of the storm, a lie, a misperception, all to lead to the inevitable storm that rains harder than ever.

The cheers continued, but so did the doubts. Mason snapped back to reality. Maybe the only way to show a fire’s true power is when it has fuel or when the umbrella is lifted. The fate is accepted. The dream is over. A light will shine brightest in the darkest of places.

Mason pushed away from the Prime Minister, grabbing a gun on his hip. Immediately hundreds of weapons pointed straight at Mason. “You are not my father!” cried Mason as a storm of tears rolled down his face.

“Mason, I gave up my life for you, my name for you. I have ended the storm! This is all for you, Mason! That society killed your mother and stole precious years from us! This has to be done!” George called.

“This is not how you lead and love a society! You can not choose who dies because of your emotions! Father, you are the storm, you are the misery, you are the rain!” Mason

screamed as a fire lit inside of him. Just then, lightning shot and thunder boomed as Mason pulled the trigger.

It all seemed to stop right then. Mason's life had been a storm, an endless rain of misery. The bullet pierced George's forehead as he dropped to the floor. A hundred more shots were fired, not as thunder, but a trumpet sound, a ringing bell, a proclamation of the day. These shots hurled toward Mason, penetrating his thin skin one at a time. He lay in a puddle, hapless, as the rain stopped.

The following commenced. Amelia had alerted the authorities during this all, but they arrived as Mason's skinny bones hit the ground. There was much questioning, but with eyewitnesses, Mason's journal, and testimonies from the world leaders, this case was closed, and the storm ended. Fifty countries no longer had their government leaders, hundreds of spies accused, and thousands charged with treason.

Amelia became a lawyer, fighting for what is just. I, Grayson, am a politician making sure our society is storm-free. And my dear friend, Mason, is remembered as a hero. He was buried next to his mother and his father (George Arthur) with an honorable funeral. His gravestone read the words: Mason the Brilliant, the Logical, the Methodical, the Solver, the Secret Finder, the man that stopped the storm.

Mason the Brave still holds a special place in my heart. He is cherished, loved, and remembered. We were the best of friends, and I am deeply grieved by his passing. But just as a storm must pass, so did he. When the agony and corruption of our world make life seem as though you are stuck in a ceaseless rain, remember storms must occur to show the beauty of the day.

POETRY
Grades 9 & 10

Afsheen Maahina Mohamed Abusali
Marshall, MN
1st Place

I Paint

I paint, to see the world.
One altered brushstroke changes a face.
An extra line adds depth to the mountains.
A blank canvas,
Waiting patiently for the brush to give it meaning.
Will it be out of sadness? Or joy?
It does not matter.
You see, the canvas will not judge.
The paintbrush cannot guide you.
And the colors do not argue.
They sit patiently for the painter to choose.
The irreplaceable artist,
Whose art cannot be mimicked by machines.
As art is only art,
If made with heart, not only brain.

Mazzi Moore
Hills, MN
2nd Place

Thoughts on English

English, a most confusing language
Its syntax only evokes lasting anguish

People devote their life to its study
So I must imagine the waters are still muddy

Clouded with oxymorons, hot ice
Direct contradictions, isn't that nice?

Homophones mean different but sound the same
Take altar and alter, both different in name

One letter is all between table and changing
The oddities of English are truly deranging

Grammar, for instance, consists of meaningless dashes
Randomly placed so a child's brain crashes

Fortunately, periods play a rather simple role
Freely declaring a sentence complete without toll

But when placed in a line, a trio of three
The innocent period raises its fee

No longer a harsh stop but a lingering pause
While three is greater than one, English usurps math in its jaws

But add a line to a period, of course joy is implied!
Melt that line into a squiggle and an answer must be replied

Speak not just of grammar and punctuation
English is also filled with kooky words that require translation

Agathokakological, just say good and bad
Xerz simply means there is greedy eating to be had

To say nothing of prefixes and suffixes bedazzling a root
These little word fragments are bound to pollute

From other origins, many a word has been taken
Now I'm learning Latin and Greek, my English misshapen

I could go on and on with its numerous crimes
Onomatopeias, noun clauses, iambic pentameter, rhymes

Alas, I can tell you no more
As my friends and I are now tasked with an even bigger chore

To decipher the works of Shakespeare, Dickens, and the like
Who have crafted classic tales of romance and labor strike

If grammar and literary devices were even slightly tough
Then the endless symbolism of these novels ... English,
enough is enough

Claire Safranski
Eden Prairie, MN
3rd Place

Addictive Lies

You lied to me.
You're always making promises that you can't keep.
That you won't keep.
Promises that lure me in. Promises that stab me in the back.
I never learn. I always follow those same bright, old promises
back to that cold, dark place.
My back is bleeding good this time.
Your jagged knife opens up new scars.
You see, you're a cruel man, Addiction.
You're a man who sneaks up on people when they least
expect you to.
You befriend people with the snap of your fingers.
You ruthlessly kill people within weeks. Months.
Of knowing them.
To be honest, those who haven't met you are very lucky.
I'm not one of the lucky ones.
I hate you.
But, unfortunately, that hate only brings me closer to you.
Because under all that hate, I still believe you.
Addiction, you take many forms.
I follow you into my car.
We climb into the backseat together.
You know the rest of the story—the way your hands combed
through my hair.
You're most infamous form stares at me in the mirror.
I have become addicted to you, Addiction, as I refuse to eat
my biggest fears.

You love me, don't you?
Don't worry, I know your love is too good to be true.
But there is something you don't know, Addiction.
I lied to you.

FICTION
Grades 9 & 10

Mazzi Moore
Hills, MN
1st Place

She Sits

She sits on a swing, a weathered board stripped of stain hanging wistfully on two fraying cords. These tattered lifelines sway gently from an equally weathered playground. She has been there since the break of dawn, now being the mysterious time in the afternoon when the sky dims but is somehow brightly illuminated with vivid hues of orange and pink. Sitting on the plank softened by the oily hands of countless fathers sending their squealing children toward the heavens, she reads. The books are about all sorts of things. Sprawling series of time-traveling heroes, Dutch oven recipe collections, and classic novels written in the English of old. At the colorful awakening of the morning, the pile rests ten high to the left, and by late afternoon, the ten sit peacefully to the right, an impromptu statue precariously guarding the creaking playset. Following the consumption of five, she slides a package of crackers out of her pocket and eats them methodically, staring at both nothing and everything. Replacing the crinkly wrapper in its cloth abode, she retrieves the sixth without hesitation. When the books are finished, she leaves. Every day. Like clockwork.

That is what I think people would see at my little park. If they cared or were watching. I'd like it if people cared, but maybe it's for the best. I'm no one of any particular interest. Knobby knees incapable of doing much more than walking, glasses that conceal my face and hair that conceals the rest, and a fair complexion leading to far too many colds. Not to

mention my book obsession and dismal home life. I'm certain all I'd get if someone watched and noticed was their pity and a firm reprimand about my fondness for reading. It really is the best option; I get my books, and everyone else gets their peace, free of Miss Tilly Andrew's overbearing burden. However, I pretend that they care.

No one comes to my park, but I still comb my knotted auburn curls, dress in personally washed and ironed outfits of modest color, and shine the little black flats that pinch my toes excruciatingly.

Every day.

No one tells me that I should, because no one cares. I share a house with people I have only visualized from the hastily scribbled notes left on the broken refrigerator. I scrape together my little meals of crackers from the pitiful piles of change left on the counter every month. I pretend that someone notices when I forget to polish the inner side of my left shoe or miss a crumb on the hollow of my cheek. My entire life is an illusion, a scripted reenactment for an invisible audience whose applause is a cacophony of overwhelming silence.

While my mother allegedly brought me into this world, books were the loving parents that allowed me to stay. These dusty luxuries of watery pulp pressed between torn covers that rested beside my blanket nest on the floor were my earliest memories of happiness. How blissful was my tiny toddler self while reading outdated copies of almanacs and oil-smeared automobile repair manuals? By the time my malleable feet were able to gain purchase with the ground, I could recite the abandoned treasure troves of random factoids faded cover to faded cover. But as my real parents, only faint outlines shimmering in the dank recesses of my mind, became increasingly distant, books assumed even more significant roles as my mentors, my guardians for life.

To school, I was two years late, although my reading and writing skills were leaps and bounds beyond my grimy classmates'. I also mastered arithmetic, became a chemist in the back corner of the "science lab," and utterly failed like a flight-attempting penguin to achieve any bit of social interaction. However, my classroom career in the sordid schoolhouse about three miles outside of my own sordid town, a collection of dilapidated houses featuring fine examples of peeling paint and leaking roofs, only lasted those short months of fall and winter. Then I was once again left alone in a creaking house with nothing but books and perpetual silence.

While late spring and summer brought rays of blinding light and swarms of blood-thirsty mosquitoes, the days stretched by as sluggishly as the overweight bumblebees droning from flower to flower. During the school year, I could walk to school in the mornings, beginning my trek across the tall grasses before the sun began to peek from the sky, return by early evening, and spend the remaining hours tediously doing long division and other such busy work. However, once summer came, I was again the lonely girl with no friends, no shiny new bicycle, and no parents willing to play games in the desiccated patch of yard. Rather than facing the harsh reality of all this, I'd spend my time at my playground, on my swing, with my books. I would not mope in my dimly lit home; rather, I'd be an aloof girl of the park with a routine, so if anyone cared, I would not be one to pity.

All this turmoil for no one but myself.

She sits on a swing, a weathered board stripped of stain hanging wistfully on two fraying cords. These tattered lifelines, her lifelines, sway gently from an equally

weathered playground. At the colorful awakening of the morning, her pile of books rests ten high to the left, and by late afternoon, the ten sit peacefully to the right, an impromptu statue precariously guarding the creaking playset and her heart. Following the consumption of five, she slides a package of crackers out of her pocket, the only food she can afford, and eats them methodically, staring at both nothing and everything, dreaming about better things. Replacing the crinkly wrapper in its cloth abode, she retrieves the sixth without hesitation. When the books are finished, she leaves. Every day. Like clockwork because what else is she to do?

Claire Safranski
Eden Prairie, MN
2nd Place

Hungry

Hello.
Dear you,

Yes, you.

You don't know *me*, but *I* know who you are.

Don't be scared, *I* won't bite.

It's okay, you can come a little closer.

There you go.

I can tell you're insecure.

It's okay.

If you let *me*, *I* will fix that.

You don't need to worry.

All you have to do is...well...

Do everything *I* say.

Thank you, Claire, for trusting me.

Sincerely,

Your new best friend

Rain drops.

My eyes blur as I step into the shower.

I turn the knob hard left and eventually the heat of the water scalds my body, forcing me to turn it right.

I look at the naked picture I see from my distorted eyes.

Tears fall like raindrops. Big and heavy.

My hands run over my full stomach. Too full.

I open my mouth and stick two shaking fingers in.

Pressing hard against the back of my throat, I gag.

Even though I cough up nothing but spit, I still shake.

A dialogue between C and D

Person C: (Shifts food around plate and taps foot furiously)

Person D: Not hungry?

Person C: (Shrugs)

Person D: Why don't you eat something?

Person C: I'm just tired.

Person D: (Frowns)

Throw. Away. Bad. Food. Immediately.

I tell Mom about how hard it is having to stay at Dad's house with all the food he has there.

The food that triggers the reward system pathway in my brain causing me to overeat, leaving me with an abundance of guilt and pain afterwards.

Mom decided it would be best to go through his pantry to throw out everything that would trigger me.

So we did. Or at least tried.

I started pulling out chip boxes and cereal.

Dad walked in.

I looked up.

He scowled.

“What are you doing?”

Mom walked in.

“She’s throwing it away, Stephen.”

“No, she isn’t.”

He grabbed the boxes and started putting them back in the pantry.

I stood there silent.

“Stephen, she needs to!”

“Other people need to eat, too,” Dad snapped back.

“You guys don’t need to eat this crap anyway,” Mom yelled.

“Why are you yelling at me?” Dad replied

“I’m defending Claire. You need to throw this out.”

Tears swelled in my eyes. This was because of me and my issues.

Don’t cry. Don’t cry. Don’t cry.

I bite my lip hard.

Tears came, nonetheless.

Dreams—our worst nightmare.

The night before I hadn't had anything for dinner, which caused me to have disturbing, twisted dreams about food that wasn't in any way enjoyable.

Minutes before my alarm saved me, I dreamt my stomach had grown to an abnormal size merely because I didn't eat, and as I woke up gasping for air, no relief came to me even when I began to understand that it was just a dream.

Other *Strange, Fake Eating Disorder*

“You have OSFED.”

“Also known as Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorder.”

“Also known as atypical anorexia.”

Congratulations, Claire. You have just been diagnosed with the world's lamest eating disorder.

“How do you feel about that, Claire?”

I feel... mad.

“What even is ‘atypical anorexia’?”

I answer her question with a question.

“Well, it's when you meet the criteria for anorexia but are not underweight.”

Challenge accepted.

Zombies

The tennis season has started up, which means school has started, which means tests are around the corner, which

means more studying, which means more stress, which means less time spent with *you*.

Woo-hoo.

For tennis practice, we get the beautiful pleasure of taking a run around the track. The track is around the football field. The football field is full of football jocks. Football jocks equal prowling, hungry zombies.

Zombies who stare mindlessly into space until we come jogging along the track.

I run fast.

“Don’t let them know you’re weak,” *you* say.

“Run faster. Don’t let them know you’re secretly fat under all that skin,” *you* say.

“Sprint harder. Don’t let them know you’re scared,” *you* say.

I finish the quarter mile in less than 2 minutes.

The zombies stop staring and become distracted again by something else worth their attention.

Nervosa

I deserve a party for this momentous occasion.

After eight months of many miserable and unsuccessful attempts at vomiting, I have finally achieved it.

It wasn’t as magnificent* as I hoped it to be.

*Magnificent: vomiting an excessive amount where the food you ate in the last 30 minutes is no longer considered the food you ate.

But, I still managed to vomit.

And then I continued.

After dinner, mainly.

I haven't stopped.

Thanksgiving

It's Thanksgiving—any rex's worst fear.

Any bulimic's worst fear for that matter as well.

I have no plan.

Mistake #1.

I go to a workout class to get skinny before I get fat.

We head to Dad's house for Thanksgiving lunch.

A charcuterie board lays on the table, staring back at me.

I take the first bite.

Mistake #2.

The roller coaster begins.

Drink Laxatives. Do sit-ups. Scream. Repeat.

I purged today.

Or at least I tried.

And... failed.

That means it's time to drink laxatives (laxative tea) and do sit ups.

Not that it makes a difference anyway.

Laxatives actually don't affect weight loss.

Neither does exercise.

Trust me, I've done my research.
20 sit-ups.
I gulp down the magical solution,
20 more sit-ups.
Down the solution goes again.
I hear my sister talking to my mom in her bedroom.
"I think I've gained weight," my sister says from afar.
I walk in the room.
They stare.
"Claire, your sister thinks she's gained weight."
"Oh."
"Ugh, I'm just so ashamed."
I lash out.
Mom yells at me.
I leave.

Hungry

Mom's still mad after the way I acted last night.
Scratch that, she's furious.
She acts like she understands how I feel.
Every time I come to her, she turns it to what she's
experienced. To what she's dealt with.
This isn't about you, Mom.
Not even close.

I need help.

But I don't want help.

This *disorder* is what keeps me afloat.

It is what keeps me alive.

I am alone in these rushing, white waters.

Alone with nothing but a log.

A log that I could let go of and swim to shore.

But I'm too scared.

And I'm too weak.

And I'm too hungry.

Sick

I'm sick.

I'm sick of the hunger pains.

I'm sick of the fullness.

I'm sick of being scared.

I'm sick of eating.

I'm sick of the fact that I'm sick of eating.

I'm sick of looking at food as if it was sent by God.

I'm sick of envying those skinny girls that walk with more strength, power, and confidence than I ever could.

I'm sick of lying in my bed in the middle of the night, brain starved, eyes wide open, body shivering, waiting for the sleep to knock me out rather than the energy that I don't have.

I'm sick of not being skinny enough to be an anorexic and not being guilty enough to be a bulimic.

I'm sick of living in this God-damn perpetual hell that I get to call my life.

I want to rip this eating disorder out of myself.

I want to stab it until it bleeds out, turning my room into a lake of pain and misery.

I want to strangle it until its lips turn purple and its tongue swells.

I want my eating disorder to burn in hell with me.

Rocks

“Remember, if you ever begin to spiral, recall that memory.”

The spiral begins.

So does the memory.

It's just Dad and me.

Just me and Dad.

He's teaching me how to skip rocks.

The sun shone down on the sapphire-blue water.

Dad smiles at me and delicately places a rock in my small, warm hands.

“The key to properly skipping rocks is the way you let go of the rock itself.”

I twist and turn.

I examine the rock and look up at Dad.

He smiles again and says softly, “If you never let go of that rock, it’ll never skip.”

“Let go.”

Goodbye

Dear *you*,

Yes, *you*.

You know me, and I know *you*.

You should be scared.

I suggest staying away.

You brought me to hell and back.

Where flames spread ruthlessly.

And God, did those flames burn.

They crawled up my skin.

They ate me alive.

Bad news for *you*: I’m not gone yet.

I’m still here, and I’ve got plans to bring *you* back to Hell with me.

Thank you, Atypical Anorexia, for making me stronger.

Sincerely,

Your worst fear.

Iris Donner
Raymond, MN
3rd Place

War and Winter

“**R**ay-mond! Raymond Joseph Wilson! Come inside, or I’ll come out to get you!”

Fearing Ms. Helen, I dropped my snowball immediately and ran in towards the house. My little sister chased after me, her grubby smock wet from the snow, her hair in messy, loose braids, and her cheeks a deep magenta.

“Ray! Wait for me! You know I can’t run as fast as you in the snow!” Ginny trudged her feet quickly, trying not to slip and fall on the frozen ground. I waited, but rushed her with every slow step. I briskly sped past our nanny, narrowly avoiding her spoon.

Ms. Helen Booker was a strapping lady, and taller than most. She kept a wooden spoon tucked sneakily into her apron, which I intently avoided familiarity with. She had crazy, wild hair that had mostly turned grey, from the many years of rearing “delightful” children, all but one white streak she wore unbound in the front. In our lesser household, we couldn’t afford a maid, cook, gardener, butler, and nanny, like so many of our neighbors, so Ms. Helen filled most of the positions. The pay wasn’t much, but she didn’t need it, we had become her family despite how she speaks to us on occasion. She did have a family at one point, but her husband passed on several years before, so Ms. Helen lived with us.

I walked inside and hung my scarf on the rack next to the fireplace; the crusted snow slowly melted away. I took a large inhale through my nose and smelled the faint recognition of chocolate. I assumed I had just begun to go

mad from the cold. Sweets and warm confections were not common ever since Hitler had begun his temper tantrum, and raged on the whole world. Despite my doubts, Ms. Helen bent down and reached from above the oven two cups of hot chocolate. Though it was watery and light in color, it still smelled brilliant and I felt the corner of my mouth emit a drool; I let it fall down my face.

“Raymond! You know I don’t like when you leave me in the cold like th—” Ginny trampled into the house, shaking off her boots and hanging her coat by the fire, just like I had done. Her voice trailed off; I knew she could smell it, too. Ginny was always very observant, which was inconvenient for me, being that anything I tried to hide from her she soon discovered and seemed to take control of, or rat on me about. In my opinion, it was a crybaby way of saying I’m jealous. You’d think that a nine year old would be more dignified.

“Say, Ms. Helen, what would that delightful smell be? I don’t suppose it’s chocolate. You’d have to save up many ration books for that, and I saw you go out and buy brown sugar the other day.” See, I told you she was observant, annoyingly so.

“Now, don’t you worry about where or how I got the chocolate. Just drink up.”

I wanted so badly to slurp the hot chocolate quickly, but I knew I wouldn’t get any for a long time after, and the cup was hot on my numb fingers, so I sipped it, savoring slowly. It didn’t really occur to me why we were getting this treat, because I can assure you, it had nothing to do with good behavior. Ms. Helen was still sore about the knitting needle incident last week. Ginny waited. She seemed more interested in the occasion than the treat itself, and she peered at Ms. Helen, trying to pick apart what on earth kind of news we would be receiving?

Ginny only peered down at her warm treat. If she wasn't going to drink it, I definitely would.

"Is this for Ray's birthday, that's not 'till tomorrow? Besides, I thought you were saving the chocolate for a cake?"

"Don't get your trousers in a bunch; I saved some for the cake."

"Then why—?" Ginny got cut off by Mum coming through the door.

She worked nights at hospital, and was usually asleep a portion of the day, or working a double shift. Mum was tall, and lovely. Now, I can't quite say what made her so beautiful, maybe it was her kind heart. She was witty and seemed to smile no matter the circumstance. You could tell because she had deep lines around her mouth that only made her all the more lovely. Even in war, even in winter, all the cold did to her was give her the most charming color on the apples of her cheeks. She had, however, become quite thin and weak, and her cheekbones pointed, her skin tired, from the burden of life in such conditions.

"How was hospital, Margie?" Ms. Helen inquired.

"Ah, let's not talk about that now."

You could always tell when it was a hard day at hospital for Mum. She worked in pediatrics, and oftentimes had to watch her patients fade away. Mum always said that her job was most to comfort the people who were losing someone, more so than people who were being lost. She was grateful for getting to come home to her healthy, precious babies, but not without the weight that bears.

The day went on, Ginny and I oblivious to what was to come.

I don't exactly know what time I woke up, but I do know that it was late into the evening. I was unsure what stirred me, but something didn't feel quite right, so I quietly

tip-toed down the stairs, trying my best not to wake the others. I turned the corner and saw candlelight and heard whispering, odd, it being so late into the night. I leaned up against the wall, and quietly listened to the soft voices behind the door. I heard my mum's voice say mid sentence, "—and you mustn't tell anybody, not even your brother."

"We thought to tell him earlier today, but I don't know if he could handle it. Frankly we weren't going to tell you either, but you're such a persistent little—"

"Helen!" Mum gently scolded. She sighed. "Now Ginny, promise me, promise me that no one will hear this information, and you will never repeat it, nor show signs of knowing."

I didn't hear anything for a while, maybe Ginny was in shock, maybe she was hesitant.

"Virginia," that's when I knew it was serious, "promise me."

"Y-yes Mum, I promise."

I heard Ms. Helen make some remark about what an ungodly hour it was to be doing this, then I heard a peck placed gently on Ginny's cheek, and she was sent off to bed. I held my breath, hoping she wouldn't see me in the dark, hoping she wouldn't hear my pounding heart. I sucked up against the wall, and she didn't see, but mindlessly passed me in the dark corridor. I might have heard gentle crying as she staggered off to her small corner bed, but I couldn't know for sure.

"Helen, I don't think she was ready..." Mum's voice trailed off, almost like it was swallowed by the darkness.

"Oh Margie, you worry too much. She's a resilient girl; if anything, I'd be concerned for Raymond. You know how anxious he gets about this bloody war."

She was right; these little unwelcomed insomnia outbursts were often a result of my angst.

“Even so, Margie, I think he knows.”

“I just want to do everything I can to protect him from it.”

I snuck back upstairs, mulling over the only fear I could find in my head, the cause of my angst, and undoubtedly the most probable. Loneliness wrapped me coldly; my father is not returning.

The next morning was a quiet one; the ground was fresh with a dusting of new snow. On a normal birthday I would've sprung out of bed with excitement, but not today. Today was strange, different, and I wondered how the day would progress. I slowly crept down the stairs, and turned cautiously into the kitchen.

“Why someone's awfully quiet this mornin'. What's the matter, didn't sleep too well last night, again?” Ms. Helen was frying pickled peppers, grease leaping excitedly from the pan when I came into the kitchen.

“Y-yes. I'm alright, hungry, though,” I stuttered, something I often did when I was overthinking.

“Must just be the excitement of your birthday.” She said it like she had no secrets to hide, like nothing was wrong.

“The chickens were feelin' generous this mornin', so I decided on omelettes, and roasted potatoes.”

Our hens, Bessie, Willberta, and Josephine were three stubborn ol' gals that we had gotten from a neighbor, just before the war started. As for the potatoes, last summer a local farmer was paying a couple children half a shilling for every bushel of potatoes they picked, so Ginny and I took up the offer and made four pounds each. In the end, thankfully, we got what felt like a bottomless haul of the pickings, and we're still eating potatoes.

Ginny waddled into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes.

“Looks like the both of ya had a rough night.”

She just nodded her head in response. Her eyes were red and puffy. She looked cold and depressed, grey almost, like Mum gets. “Happy twelfth birthday, Ray,” and she gave me a hug.

Ms. Helen gave her a look that said “act normal, remember what we talked about?”, something that I wouldn’t have noticed otherwise. Everything was so odd, and desperately sad. I could only worry that the dread of never again seeing my father was true.

He had left in the night, two years ago, and didn’t say a word. Not to me, at least. My father’s best method of protection was secrets, or at least he thought so. He thought it was better not to say anything, than to hurt someone in the process. Usually in the late afternoons, we would listen to the radio, but not that night. That night, Dad was trying to protect us from war, from winter. It was a lovely evening; I thought absolutely nothing to be wrong, until the next morning when we woke. He’d left. Every now and again we got letters until they stopped coming, but Mum never told us why. She knew though, she knew. Now, maybe that’s what Ginny discovered. Well, now I bloody have to know.

Mum entered the kitchen, smothering me in kisses and birthday wishes, gushing over her “little man.” On a normal day she would’ve worked or slept, deservedly so, but not today. She wanted to celebrate with us.

We rid our emptied plates; everything was as delicious as anticipated. Even after all the potato eating, I never grew ill of them.

The girls surprised me with gifts, and the dampened mood began to lighten. Ginny had knit me a nice hat out of old threads from a sweater that she had grown out of, Ms. Helen was going to make me a small cake for tonight from

the rationed chocolate, and Mum, Mum's gift was the best of all.

"Stay right here, Ray, I need to go grab it." She went down into the cellar, a place she knew I never went to because of a precarious bat predicament a few years ago. On her way back up, I saw a box wrapped in butcher paper in her hands. I longed to tear it open, but didn't because I knew we could still use the paper if I was careful. I gingerly opened the box; what lay inside filled me with joy. It was a jacket.

"Is this—is this?" I excitedly jumped to my feet.

"It is." A soft smile fell upon her face, and the color returned to her cheeks for a short while. I tried it on. It had patches on the front, and our name, Wilson, was embroidered on the sleeve in elegant cursive letters. It was my father's jacket, covered in pins, ribbons, and patches from his days in secondary school. It was made of worn, brown leather, and it had fur on the inner neckline of the jacket. It was warm, and heavy; it felt like a hug from the old man himself. That feeling brought an unexplainable joy and I felt as if he was standing right beside me. I missed him.

I looked over at my mother, tears in her eyes. "You look just like him."

Ginny stared in awe of me, speechless, agreeing with Mum.

Our short day continued with jacks and cards; we felt robbed by winter hours. We ate again, this time thin cuts of meat, vegetables sautéed in butter, and the gifted, delectable chocolate cake. The lack of sleep from the night prior made me fatigued much earlier than usual. The night seemed to grab hold of me and I felt the weight as I fell onto my bed. Mum kissed me, wished me a final happy birthday, then headed off to hospital for her shift. I gently nodded off to sleep.

The next morning was less solemn than the last, but mundane. Winter left little to do.

I turned to Ginny, her face dull, and bored, and said to her, “Eat quickly, Gin, and we’ll go out to play.”

“Ray! Ray, wait for me!” but I didn’t. I rushed outside, and let the hostile cold color my cheeks. She came out, smiling ear to ear, something I was worried she wouldn’t do again. We played for hours in the snow, building and frolicking and laughing. I pommelled Ginny with a snowball.

“Ow, Raymond Joseph! Do that again and I’ll—” she stopped, froze and took in the surroundings. A grave look fell on her face. “Ray, we should go inside,” she mumbled. I couldn’t hear clearly; she said it so coldly, it was like winter possessed her breath, and took over the words sending an icy chill down my spine.

“Ginny, what’s wrong?” I walked closer to her, and then I heard it. Bombs, far in the distance went off, and I could feel the ground rumble. I began to rush inside, grabbing Ginny to quickly run in with me. She looked at me, panic in her face, and gripped my hand tighter. It all happened in a blur, and the ground seemed to slip beneath her. She fell on the ice, and let out a yelp of pain as she struggled to get up. Ms. Helen ran out, and quickly ushered us to the cellar. It sounded like the end, and the adrenaline pumped through my head as it pounded and pulsed through my veins.

We sat in the cold, damp cellar and tried to stay close and keep calm. The bomb alarms hadn’t gone off; we had no warning. Ms. Helen held us in her strong arms and kept us safe. She murmured prayers and things that I couldn’t understand under breath. The ground shook with an unforgiving hunger to take any life that didn’t proceed with caution. I felt empty in my stomach, and I wanted to run

outside and see what was happening, how far the damage was.

Then I thought of Mum. She had been at hospital all day and had no warning either. It was about this time she was walking home. I didn't want to think it, but it almost felt as if she had already passed. She had already been gone. I looked over at Ginny. It was hard to see in the thick darkness, but even I could tell by the faint expression on her face that she thought the same thing.

The bombing shortly passed, but it felt like we were in the cellar for hours. When the noise and the dust subsided, we just sat. We just sat and waited, as if someone was going to reach out a hand and pull us up from the cellar. I felt so much grief, it was as though I knew, before the letter even arrived. She was gone.

The funeral followed three days later. Not much damage had been done in our neighborhood, but the corner shop that Mum had taken shelter in on her way home was in complete ruin. Our neighbors came and brought food and offered their sympathy. Ginny had worn Mum's black shawl that she only wore on sad days, and I wore my father's jacket. Ms. Helen cried all day long, for days, but after her final goodbye to her dear friend she said she wouldn't cry; now it was her time to comfort.

I wasn't listening to the service that our local preacher had offered to give. Outside, the sky was covered and grey, but there was no wind as though Mum had asked it to wait until we said our goodbyes. After the service, people went home and I stood. I stood and I cried.

When it was time for us to leave, I leaned down, half-expecting a warm embrace, overcome by the thought that I would never be held by her again. In that moment, I heard a crinkle in my jacket. I put my hand into the inner pocket—I had never thought to check it—and when I pulled it out it

was a letter addressed to me and Ginny. I read it aloud to her, and Ms. Helen. It said:

Dearest Ray and Ginny,

I miss you and long to see you. Ray, I regret not being there for yet another birthday, but I trust you will keep strong being the man of the house while I'm away. War is cruel, unpredictable, and seemingly unending. I'm being sent to the trench, and I don't know if I will make it to ever see you again. So Ginny, keep smiling, reading, and saying clever things that astound me, and Ray, remember that I'm proud of you. Send your mother my love.

I love you,

Father.

Ginny cried softly, "Mum read me that letter the night before your birthday. I cried all night." She began to sob, "And now Mum. We're orphans, Ray, orphans."

My chest felt so heavy, and it was as though I didn't think I could move on, but I did as time does, forcing me to. The mundane nature of school dulls your mind, and days grow fuzzy, and the pain stifles but the ache remains. Ms. Helen filled Mum's position at hospital, demanding Ginny and I to mature too quickly, cheating us in the eyes of this world. But as daffodils endure the last melting of snow, I endured the hard, redeeming nature of winter. Hope replaced desolation, eventually, and the robins once again filled the air with song, although they were never really gone; it's just I was listening this time.

After school, on yet another day Ginny and I prepared dinner, and awaited the arrival of Ms. Helen. As she walked through the door, we recognized that look of a hard day and thought of Mum. She smiled, and admired our blooming, in spite of our journey, when we heard a knock on the door. I

went to open it, expecting another blank face with delivery in hand.

As I cracked open the door, it was someone unfamiliar. He was dressed in a soldier's uniform, missing his leg from knee down, leaning against crutches. He had stubble on his face, and large, callused bear hands. Ginny burst through me, and clutched the man, nearly shoving him over. Tears welled in my eyes; Dad was home. Ms. Helen pleased in spirit yet wistful, uttered, "The Lord answered prayers."

I surrounded them both, liberated. I could hear my sister's tears of joy, of relief, of sadness, and grief as she nuzzled her head into him.

Breath filled my lungs once again, and loneliness departed. I survived the winter; my war had ended.

POETRY
Grades 11 & 12

Ming Wei Yeoh
Chanhassen, MN
1st Place

Are stars and suns one and the same?

try reaching for the moon, because even if
you miss you'll catch a star instead,
but when the stars all fall from the sky
and the world breaks into ten thousand pieces,
do I walk on the shards and gather them
in my arms or lie down to sleep in a nest
made out of them?

would I make a necklace from the broken
piece, or maybe it would make a ring instead,
and am I supposed to be happy with it or
wish I had a crown instead? like a king or
a pope and what if I cut my finger on the
sharp, sharp edge of the shiny star and I drop it
on the ground where it breaks into smaller
pieces

if I cried would my tears be sharp too?
and they would say, be grateful you have a star
some people don't even have a star,
and actually, I never wanted the moon at all
but without it I'd drown in the dark
with only stars to light the way and that was
too scary to consider

**Greta Olsen
Spicer, MN
2nd Place**

I Don't Exist

i am not me
i am them

i am a reflection of everything i have seen
a grotesque collage of novels, poems, plays, and paintings
shoved haphazardly into the hands of a child
with scissors and glue and told to make a person

i am Frankenstein
stitching words into sinew, paper into skin
and pumping it full of the blood of
stories other people wrote
to create a body for myself
i am not me

i don't exist
i am not the source of the image
i am its reflection
distorted by time and
repainted by ideas
anything good i am i have seen
stolen, molded, shaped into my own and called it me
but i don't exist

how can a collection of
learned thoughts and copied movements
parade as a person with
stolen skin and a borrowed voice
i don't exist

Tera Johnson
Marshall, MN
3rd Place

Black Ice

Trapped in black ice, I am left alone
The moonlight above me shines a pale color of bone
My hands look for a way out, but my eyes look for a way in
By being here, am I committing a sin?
For you, I would sell myself short
But to you, I am nothing of any sort

FICTION
Grades 11 & 12

Ming Wei Yeoh
Chanhassen, MN
1st Place

Summer, when we were young

The words at the top of the email are pink and excessively curly, crowding the screen with coiling numbers and exclamation points. *Chester Hills High School Class of '96! Saturday, September 23rd, the park by Lake Mary. Bring a dish. Bring your kids.* Below, familiar names pop out between smiling, aging faces, the kids I left behind with the lake docks, SUVs, and private lawns. My cursor floats over the little trash icon.

Then I see your name, poking out from the tangle of letters, and my mouse halts. A tiny shock runs down my spine. It's been years since I last touched those syllables, and they've grown hard and spiked. They scrape my gums, fighting to get out, but I swallow their little burr-like bodies; I recite your name until it feels like it belongs again.

I try the other half, too, though it's new to me—a last name that tastes like sweet Midwestern corn. It's nothing like your old one, which crumpled teachers' brows and conjured images of strange hats, rice paddies, and wars. I wonder how many people blink and stutter when they see you. I wonder if you still open your mouth and smile at them, showing rows of juicy, golden kernels for teeth.

I dial one of the numbers at the top of the email. The woman who answers is called Stacy. She's one of the reunion organizers and she says we were in the same gym class sophomore year. *Do you remember?* she asks. I wonder if she's talking about that time Tyler M. jump-spiked a volleyball into my nose, or the many times Mr. Lewis made

us run laps until our faces filled with blood, throbbing and straining like a bunch of ripe, taut-skinned tomatoes.

I tell her, *No, I don't*, and she refers me to a woman named Jada. They pass me along, down the list of names on the email; I listen until I feel like I know you again. You're still living in Chester Hills. You have a husband and two sons. You host a Friday book club with your high school friends. They give me your number and say they're sure you'd love to hear from me. They're sure you miss me.

So I enter the nine digits and let them hover inside my phone. I memorize the color of the *Call* button—an intense, spring-grass green—and recite your number while I'm lying in bed. I don't know why I'm doing this. To remind you of all that stretches between us, or just to hear your voice again.

It takes three days, but I finally call. When you pick up, it takes me a couple of seconds to calibrate, and I have to sit down as you start to talk about yourself. You have the same light and round voice, the same laugh that sounds like a mouse squeaking. Words are different coming from your mouth—warmer and sharper. They trail prickles along my skin, even through the fuzzy speaker.

What are you up to nowadays? is the first question you ask me.

I'm an attorney, I say, the sentence hopping out of my mouth too quickly, colliding with the tail end of yours.

You say you teach Pilates at the local gym, but I already know that. You laugh for no reason, the sound squealing in my ear, and I start to count the tiles on the kitchen floor.

You ask me if I'm married.

I say, *No, I'm not*.

You laugh again, and this time I bring up how familiar your last name sounds—could it be that same old Walker from high school?

That's him, you say. You know, what's really funny is that neither of us could've ever imagined it working out. He always said that Oriental girls weren't his type.

I can see you smiling across the line, your mouth pushing your eyes into gentle, cheerful arches.

I remember your husband's face. I remember watching the two of you in our physics class, the way you teased and flirted, pushed and pulled like orbiting planets, acting out a performance that was irresistible to the other students. They adored you. Even your names made the perfect coupling—pretty and all-American, sweet on the tongue and ear.

I'm sure he'd love to meet you again, you say.

Sure, I answer.

I remember the way you made him your sun, pinning your eyes and your sweet-corn smile on him, only him. I remember the way your gaze passed over me when he was around, returning only when you needed a laugh. I wonder if you ever even noticed—if, for a moment, I was ever something substantial, something more solid than a shadow.

Hey, you know that cartoon that used to air when we were kids?

I ask. The one with the little Chinese cat.

You think about it for a moment. *Was there one like that?* you ask.

The cat was called Ling-Ling, I say. He was a doctor and his favorite food was dumplings.

Oh! Oh my gosh, that's what you're talking about. I used to call you that, didn't I? That was so stupid. I'm so sorry. Your laugh squeaks like unoiled wheels.

Yeah, I say.

You called me that no matter what class we were in, whenever you saw me, but you said it more when he was around. You stuck it in every phrase, reeled me into the conversation just to say it one more time, searching his face.

As your voice goes on and on in the background, fawning over high school memories, I'm aching to ask you, *Are you happy with him? Are you really, truly happy—with your thick-skulled husband, your gym job, and your little house in Chester Hills?*

Your voice pulls me back to the phone. *Hey, hey, do you remember when we used to go to the fair in the summer? We went on the roller coaster so many times we got sick. Do you remember that?*

I remember. I remember the smell of fried-everything, of cotton candy sticking in a blue ring around our lips. I remember the pebbles that would get lodged between our toes when we took off our sandals and ran, dodging parents with strollers and zigzagging between the tents and food carts. Your voice shouting over the chatter and music, calling me the name of that slit-eyed cat—joyously, adoringly. Your hand, warm and dry, gripping mine.

I hang up the phone while you're still talking, cleaving your sentence in half. I'm swallowed, for a moment, by the space around me. At this time of the day, my apartment is draped in cool light and silence. A sliver of life leaks in from outside, from the college students cheering and rattling six-packs on the sidewalk below. I look down at my hand—rough, strong, ringless—and wonder, *How do you manage to do it?* How do you insist on loving your life when it should have destroyed you a long time ago?

A resounding thud jerks me into the present, and I find my phone staring up at me from the tile, zigzagged with cracks. There is one big dent that looks like a flower, tiny thread-like petals shooting out in every direction. I trace the splinters gently. The chipped glass scrapes the pad of my thumb, cutting only deep enough to draw a thin, pale line across the skin. I raise my arm over my head and hurl my

phone across the room; the screen bursts against the wall, shedding crumbs and fat pieces of glass onto the floor.

In the morning, I sweep the mess into my purse. I think of you the entire time. I think of you while eating breakfast, while leaning my head on the reluctant curve of the seatbelt during the ride to work. I see you outside, your face in an ad for a Chinese seaweed snack, rippling and fluttering on a restaurant window.

I try not to think of the fair, of our childhood, and then I do; bits and pieces of it appear in the dull, familiar sights of my city, in the halal trucks and the trash on the sidewalk and the pink sandals of a little girl slapping the concrete behind her. It insists on staying, even in this most inhospitable environment. It murmurs in my ear, *Summer is just a month away*.

In front of me, the cab driver's head bobs along to the electric pop song blaring from the radio. I link my fingers together—one hand squeezing the other tightly, like a friend—and whisper the name you gave me. I let the music swallow up the tiny sound, feel it pool through my bones, thrumming. As the city smears across the window, I let the memories sag over me like a blanket.

After work, I walk to the electronics repair shop on the corner, where there's a little boy manning the counter, barely fifteen. I show him the crushed cell phone and my credit card, which shines like a razor between my fingers. He asks for two-fifty to get it done by the weekend, and I press the card into his palm.

The rain outside falls in heavy bullets, pinging off rooftops and bruising my shoulders through my shirt. Spring showers here are nothing like they are in Chester Hills. Here, they draw the rats from the sewers and fill the air with damp, thick odors. I try to picture the flecks of budding green that

you must be seeing outside your window right now, the rich, earthy scents I can almost smell again if I try hard enough.

My shoes squelch over soaked trash, carrying me in the opposite direction of my apartment building. They take me to the park, where business has mostly fled, leaving empty shells shuttered against the storm. They take me to the tiny push-cart that remains, the battered one with the bug-eyed cartoons tattooed on its sides that I pass every morning in my cab. It's parked in a little dry spot, under the white skirt of a streetlight, and a man is bent over it, twirling fluffy blue fibers around a stick. His eyes flit to me as I approach. They take me in, my drenched shoes and blazer, and widen—then melt a moment later. He smiles and shakes his head at the bill that I offer, pressing the stick into my hand. Leaning against the foot of the streetlight, I pinch off wooly blue clumps, swimming in the sugary sweet and the stickiness that coats my lips and fingertips.

In these moments, I can't stop seeing your face. The version I can remember—round, freckled, too bright. How have you changed since I last saw you? I want to see the stripes of gray baked into your hair and compare them with mine. I want to hear your child's laugh, hold your hand, take you to the fair when summer comes.

On Sunday I pick up my phone from the little boy at the repair shop. It gleams as though never broken, the cracks lost in brand-new luster. When I tap it awake, I find a message from you. It catches me off guard, throws me off my axis like your name did. I don't know what to expect; my heartbeat echoes in my ears as I press *play* on the recording.

There is the clatter of dishware and your sons' voices in the background. You start with *Hi* and my name—my real one—and *I hope you're doing well*. Then you're saying all sorts of things, pausing like a child gathering courage, your words stumbling over one another. You're wondering if you

upset me the last time we talked, and if so, you're really sorry. You're sorry for even more. Sorry for calling me that name, that horrible name. Sorry for ditching me for your boyfriend. Sorry that you can't remember everything you did to me that was wrong—but you want me to know that when you say it now, you mean it. This goes on and on and I listen, rubbing my fingers over my barren hand. At the end you say you'd love to see me again, if I'm okay with it.

The recording finishes with a few beats of fuzzy silence, followed by a tiny click.

I call you. I feel like I'm about to cry, my voice pulled tight as I dig for the right words. You sound surprised when you answer, almost nervous, the soundtrack of your world clamoring in the background. Our conversation is filled with the courtesy of not-quite strangers and the awkwardness of teenagers. I get to hear you laugh again.

And later, when I see you framed by the lakes and the budding trees of our hometown, I find that you're still nothing like I could have imagined. But you take my hand, hold it firm and tight, and the lakes and trees swell to fill my world, familiar and alive.

Ming Wei Yeoh
Chanhassen, MN
2nd Place

Girls and Sea Urchin Boys

He's watching her from across the street. She looks at his face and decides that she probably knows him—either from her econ class or the party hosted by Phi Kappa Theta last week. He has the kind of face you see copy-pasted at those places. The girl's expression hardens and she starts to breathe using one of the patterns that she learned from a yoga video. *In through the nose, out through the mouth.* When you see a boy like him, so hungry that he's tasting you with his eyes, it's time to gear up for battle. It's time to hone in on that steady-going voice in the back of your ear—your mother's or aunt's or grandma's—and let it swell through your body from head to toe.

She pretends not to see him at first, pinning her eyes on the cold glow of her cellphone. She hears him jog across the street anyway. He calls, "Hey, hold up!" before falling in step with her. She has no choice but to look up, pretend to recognize him, and smile.

"Hey, what's up?"

"I remember you from the party," he says. He snaps his fingers—once, twice. His mouth folds and flips around syllables he pretends are on the tip of his tongue.

"Connie," she says.

"Connie," he repeats. "I'm Ryan. Can I buy you a drink, Connie?"

She says, "Maybe another time. I have an exam tomorrow."

It's dark outside, even with the street lights, but her eyes are too keen, and they don't miss that the curls of his hair

have already started growing stiff and sharp, like the skin of a sea urchin. It's the first sign they teach you to look for up close. It means that he's getting hungrier.

"Come on. Just one round. You pick the place."

"Sorry. I can't fail my math class." She laughs a little. You're always supposed to laugh, especially if you don't know what to do. It makes them think that they're being smooth—that they'd have a chance any other day, so they can afford to let you go this time.

"You don't mean that, right?" He's really close now, and there's an odor coming from his body that's nothing like cologne or deodorant or any other male smell. It's harsh and bitter and coats the inside of the girl's nostrils like plastic film.

"Sorry. I really am. But I can't," she says.

The yoga instructor's voice: *In, out. In, out. Take it easy. Don't let yourself get worked up.* It's not working. It's starting to feel like she can't breathe at all.

Her mother's voice, always whispering fierce words of warning and strategy, flattens and twists into a faraway, unintelligible hiss. The girl is not observing or thinking or calculating anymore. All she wishes for is a pair of arms—her mother's or her aunt's or her grandma's—to swallow her and carry her away.

Then her legs are moving on their own. She's trying to escape, and that's the one thing they tell you to never do. Don't ever leave until he says you can. He seems to sense what she's trying to do because he locks his fingers around her arm.

"Woah, there, hold on," he says, smiling as if she's just told a joke, or he's just told one and he's really proud of himself. "Look, I'm not a pushy guy. I just—I really like you."

But he doesn't let go. The teeth that make up his smile look eerily pointed now, wet with saliva, and someone passing by might catch a glimpse and think they were imagining things. But the girl knows it's real. She knows all the signs.

The boy leans in, fluttering his eyes closed the way that men do when they're about to kiss you or take a bite out of your face. She closes her eyes too, squeezing them shut as she tears out of his grip in one aching motion, as if that will somehow lessen the severity of what she's doing.

She takes off down the sidewalk. Her arm is throbbing, and her breath leaves her body in big, irregular puffs. As she runs, pairs of eyes follow and condemn her.

I'm sorry, she shouts at them silently. The words bubble up her throat like mucus. The voice of the yoga instructor rises in her ears again, twisting and melting together with her mother's, her aunt's, her grandma's. *In, out. In, out. Take it easy. Calm down. Don't get upset. Don't get upset.*

**Greta Olsen
Spicer, MN
3rd Place**

A Poor Substitute

The Girl had been invited in. She stepped over the threshold and into Sarah Wester's home, only recently finished construction. The house had a sporadic quality to it. Like it was in constant limbo, with hallways that felt like sitting rooms and stairs that led to the wrong wings.

The Girl had a name, but the letters on her birth certificate were nearly identical to the letters on her older sister's death certificate, so she ignored them. She had been called "girl" for so much of her life that it had become the sole thing she responded to.

She was 17, slender with pale hair that her mother dyed to be paler and more like the portrait of her older sister that hung in the living room. In fact, the only difference between the Girl and her sister's portrait was the eyes. Many a guest commented on the skill of the artist who had painted the girl, but no one questioned the painting having blue eyes instead of brown.

Sarah Wester had been a wonderful host. They sat for a time in one of the house's many sitting rooms and sipped on tea as Sarah told the Girl about her daughter.

She listened intently and absently drank the tea, ignorant of the gravestone outside, on it inscribed "Alice Wester July 1866 - August 1866".

"Do you want to meet her?"

The Girl paused, her cup raised halfway to her lips, and spoke for the first time since introducing herself. "Yes, Ma'am."

Sarah gave her a warm smile and set aside her own teacup to stand.

They walked through the odd house to Alice's bedroom and the Girl quickly lost any sense of direction. She suspected that Sarah Wester could have led her in circles through the house for hours and she would never know.

The house also had the odd habit of appearing differently depending on which way you traveled down the hallway. When the Girl looked back over her shoulder it didn't look at all like the same hall she had traveled down. It still had a cheery disposition, but it was muted somehow. Like a bruised flower.

Or a coffin painted yellow.

The Girl turned to face forward.

"Alice has been so lonely these past few years; it will be good for her to have a companion her age." Sarah continued to speak, a monologue that she hadn't quite stopped since leaving the sitting room.

They approached a yellow door at the end of a long hall. Sarah stopped outside the door and gave it two quick raps before opening it. The room was dark, lit only by the flickering lantern by the bed.

"Here we are, Alice." Sarah Wester waved her into the room.

The Girl stepped forward.

In the dim light, The Girl wasn't able to spot a window to pull back the curtains from and cast more light into the room. It couldn't be good for a child to be kept in such darkness.

The door slammed shut behind her. The lock clicked and something snapped into place in The Girl's mind. She hadn't told her mother where she was going.

"Mrs. Wester?" the Girl called, her voice steeped in panic. "Mrs. Wester, the door is locked."

“Now now Alice, it's time for your nap.”

With that, Sarah Wester fastened the key back around her neck and went back to tea, taking no mind of the child's screams behind her.

NONFICTION
Grades 11 & 12

Kayla Ourada
Wabasso, MN
1st Place

They Come and Go

Relationships are the most challenging thing for one person. They come and go every day. From an encounter with a fast food worker all the way to family. Some end temporarily while others end forever. I have lost many people in my life. Most to distance but some to death. Relationships are the hardest for me to make because I fear that I will lose them.

Friendships used to be easy for me to make. I used to be a social butterfly. This all changed after I let myself give up on life. After that experience that day I was ashamed and didn't want to hurt more people so I cut them all out. I moved away and told myself I was just starting my life over—a clean slate. I began to make friends with negative people. This is because they were easy to leave and not feel bad about because it was them, not me. Right?

Little did I know that I was only hurting myself more. After each friend, I became less like myself. I completely changed. After changing so much I wanted to end it all. For the second time, I was in the hospital. I was not able to stand the person I had become. I looked in the mirror and saw a different person's story. I hated myself so much. I didn't think I would ever be able to go back to the person I was. But I started to hang out with good people and slowly saw improvement through each interaction.

Sebastian started as a good friend of mine but soon we started dating. He showed me that I am worthy of affection and that I don't need to fear relationships. I still feared them because of the multiple unwanted advances on me that

happened in the past. I knew he wouldn't do anything to hurt me, but I suffer from PTSD and that caused it to be difficult even to hug him. I know that I was not easy to deal with and he tried so hard to make me feel safe. It just was not enough.

In his eyes, he may think he didn't help, but he did. Without him, I don't think I would have been able to find my voice. I was never able to share how I felt because I was scared of being punished. Whenever I tried I was told I was talking back and I would be verbally and emotionally abused as a punishment. He showed me the importance behind it so I soon started to fight, yet I could not say it loud enough for people to hear.

Carsten was a close friend of mine who was more like family than anything. He helped me through so much. Every day he would drive by my house with his big dorky smile and say hi. Whenever I went on runs he would follow along on his ATV or any of his other vehicles. He showed how great life was and he helped me achieve my goals. This happiness didn't last forever though.

About a year after I moved I got the news that he had passed away in an ATV accident. I was mortified. I collapsed and wept. That day I lost someone more than a friend; I lost someone I loved as family. I wanted to go and say goodbye but my mother refused. This put me in a grieving state for a long time. When I was finally able to break free and see him the grass already found spots to grow. It was rainy and cold that day. The ground was soaked but I still collapsed next to him and pleaded.

I begged for it not to be true and then for forgiveness. I said I love him as a family but I was unable to say goodbye and send him off to his resting place. I understand that it was not my fault but I blame myself to this day. His friend gave me hope to persevere through life. He was one of my main supporters when I lived by him. I miss seeing his smile as he

drives by and waves. I miss our laughs on the bus on the way to and from school. I miss just standing there watching him zoom around racking his driveway. He treated me with such kindness every day. This is one of the friendships I wish I could have again but it will never be the same without him.

After going through many disposable friends I met Amanda. After meeting, it seemed we just clicked. We hung out and ended up getting closer. I thought it was just another friend that wouldn't last; man, was I wrong. One day she invited me to get Taco Bell with her after a football game. As we sat in the car eating she asked questions about me as a person. The one question that stood out the most was her asking if I was happy.

After that question, I knew that I couldn't let this friendship end like all the others. I told her about my past but most of all I told her about the present. I shared who I used to be and how I wanted to go back and be that person, the real me. I told her how the person I am now disgusted me to the point of self-harm. She soon started to tear up after hearing my story and this was expected as it happens every time I share it, yet this time was different. She was not crying in sympathy but crying in understanding. Her tears showed me she understood and that she would be there to help.

Amanda saved my life in so many ways. Without her help, I would still be trapped in a place that was not healthy for me. She gave me the courage to seek help and open up about what was happening. She showed me that I have a voice that should be heard. I learned that it is not normal to be shut down when trying to express how I feel. It is not normal to be restricted from friends, social events, and money. I learned that I don't have to suppress emotions just to make others happy. Most of all I learned that abuse is not normal.

Thanks to Amanda I have goals and plans for my future. I am open to change and can't wait for it to come. I want to be happy and I am now allowed to choose how I feel. I never thought I would have future plans let alone a future. I never thought I would even make it through high school before. Every time I wake up I am one day closer to being able to achieve great things. I have so many plans for myself and I plan to make a change. These new plans are thanks to Amanda; she showed me that I should not fear the future and I should welcome it.

After becoming more myself I met someone who would inspire me most of all. Thanks to Andrew I have been able to fight for things I am passionate about, and I won't let others judge me for working hard on things I enjoy. Andrew passed away on January 13, 2023. I have been struggling with the fact that he is indeed gone, forever. He was inspirational, even heroic in my eyes.

On my first day of band, he played his saxophone and I was instantly drawn in. He was not just the best and most passionate player there, he was the friendliest. He may not have realized this but his passion for music relit the spark in me that was once blown out. He showed how even the most simple songs have so much emotion behind them. He showed me how to play with emotion. Thanks to him I was able to grow musically but also emotionally. I am now able to distinguish different emotions and how to properly handle them. He also showed that you just have to be yourself and the right people will flow around you. Never force a relationship with someone but also never make someone feel left out or unheard.

Thanks to these few people I was able to grow as a person, the person I want to be. I have also been able to live a better life. Each of these people gave me a chance, and with that chance, I made some amazing friends. Yes, I have

lost most of them, but I could never allow myself to lose the memories they gave me. Each day I think of at least one of these people and ask myself, would they be proud of where I am now? I have learned that the answer to this question is yes. They only want me to be happy and free.

It is difficult to lose friends, especially in death. It is inevitable though. I learned that even though people come and go, each of their memories stick with you and each one changes you. It is up to you to pick how you change. You shouldn't change yourself just to fit in, but instead, change to be the person you want to be.

I have never felt so comfortable in my skin. I am now able to look in the mirror and be proud of who I am becoming. The reason I say friendship is the hardest relationship to have is because you will change. It is just a matter of whether you take that and change into a person you are able to look at and say this is me.

**The History of the Annual Creative Writing Contest
Sponsored by Southwest Minnesota State University
& Southwest West Central Service Cooperative**

The Creative Writing Program at Southwest Minnesota State University, working in partnership with Southwest West Central Service Cooperative, designed and conducted the first annual Creative Writing Contest in the spring of 2005.

The contest was subtitled *Giving Voice to the Youth of Southwest and West Central Minnesota* and was established to encourage a love of language and writing among the region's young people. We wanted to recognize gifted young writers in this area of Minnesota. That first annual contest unearthed a wealth of talent and demonstrated the desire of our young people to tell their stories and express their imaginations through writing. The endeavor was so successful that SMSU and SWWC Service Cooperative have continued the contest on an annual basis. We are proud to note that the Creating Spaces Writing Contest is now in its 19th 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, Creative 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 the *Creating Spaces* anthology in which the winning pieces from every category and group are published. The first-place winners in the 11th-12th grade category for fiction, nonfiction and poetry each receive an SMSU First-year Tuition Scholarship. This celebration begins with a keynote address by a published Midwest writer followed by a reception where the student writers meet each other, the SMSU student and faculty judges, and the keynote author.

Keynote Speakers at the Creating Spaces Writing Contest

2005 – Larry Gavin
2006 – Rebecca Fjelland Davis
2007 – Bill Holm
2008 – Vincent Wixon
2009 – Mary Logue
2010 – Kristin Cronn-Mills
2011 – Rebecca Fjelland Davis
2012 – Nicole Helget and Nate LeBoutillier
2013 – Thomas Maltman
2014 – Saara Myrene Raappana
2015 – James A. Zarzana
2016 – Christine Stewart-Nuñez
2017 – James Autio
2018 – Geoff Herbach
2019 – Megan Maynor
2020 – Terri Michels
2021 – Shannon Gibney
2022 – Xavier Pastrano

2023 Keynote Presenter: Lauren Carlson

Lauren K. Carlson is the author of *Animals I Have Killed* (Comstock Review Chapbook Prize) and serves as editor for *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*. Her manuscript in progress was awarded the 2022 Levis Stipend from Friends of Writers. She holds an MFA in Poetry from Warren Wilson College and lives in Michigan with her family, after a decade of formation in Minnesota's rural prairies. Find her work in journals such as *Blue Earth Review*, *Waxwing*, and *Salamander Magazine* among others.

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To the SMSU Creative Writing Program Intern, Meagan Hansen, who made time in her busy academic schedule to help coordinate various aspects of the awards ceremony.

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Finally, and most importantly, to all the parents, teachers, friends, and relatives who encourage children to read, write, and submit their best work to the Creating Spaces Writing Contest each year. We owe you our most heartfelt thanks.

