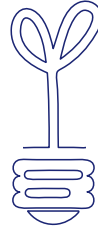




2019



International Torrance Legacy Creativity Awards

Creative Writing

Talented young writers were invited to submit their most creative compositions in recognition of the legacy of creativity pioneer E. Paul Torrance. Over the past 11 years, the International Torrance Legacy Creative Writing Awards competition has attracted hundreds of young authors who took part in two major categories: poetry and short story. In this year of judging submissions, we were pleased to see evidence of student maturity and growth in writing, in composition, as well as in depth of feeling and insight.

Student participation represented ages 8-18. Poems and stories were assessed in four age-level categories: 8-10, 11-12, 13-15, and 16-18. The themes elicited a wide range of creative compositions—some strikingly original and imaginative. Entries also reflected a diversity of ideas and talents expressed by students throughout the United States and other countries, including Canada, Israel, New Zealand, Bahrain, Dominican Republic, Poland, Singapore, and South Korea.

A panel of judges, comprised of teachers, authors, and editors in the Chicago area, evaluated the quality of student poems and stories. Each used rubrics to critique the compositions, focusing for stories on such criteria as organization, character, and plot development, and for poetry, linguistic expressiveness, imagery, originality, and depth. All judges commended the maturity and creativity evident in student writing.

Joan Franklin Smutny
Director of International Torrance Legacy Creativity Awards and
Coordinator of Creative Writing

Director of the Center for Gifted/Midwest Torrance Center for Creativity
Glenview, Illinois

Poetry

Ages 8-10

First Place

Priscilla L. Ho

Age 10

La Crescenta, CA

USA

"If You Are Not From California..."

Amelia Juey Oon Tay

Age 10

Singapore

"I, Malala"

Second Place

Pavana Amarone Attonito

Age 8

Darien, CT

USA

"Water Wishes"

Sio Huang Lee

Age 10

Singapore

"Butterfly"

Third Place

Jacinth Tan

Age 10

Singapore

"A Connection Unforgotten"

First Place

If You Are Not From California ...
By Priscilla L. Ho , La Crescenta, CA

If you are not from California
you might think it's all one big Universal Studios ride,
magical, exciting, and colorful like Haight-Ashbury's tie-dye.

If you are not from California
you might think it's always so "Hollywood,"
glittering like diamonds on an Oscar night dress
and shiny like a movie star's white teeth.

But if you look deeper into California's past,
you will realize that it's more like the street light
outside my house,
constantly needs fixin'
because it flickers and goes dark,
shrouding our neighborhood in darkness.

If you are not from California,
you might not know much about the Chumash,
who built gorgeous grass mat houses and made clothing out of tulle and animal skin,
until they were kicked off their land by Spaniards, Mexicans, and Americans,
starved,
flogged,
and enslaved.

If you are not from California,
you might not know about the Chinese workers
who built much of the Transcontinental Railroad,
which allowed Americans to
send mail and travel from north to south and west to east and back.

If you are not from California,
you might not know that the Chinese,
instead of getting paid,
suffered
discrimination,
death threats,
and massacres.

The environment also suffered,
when people from around the world
mined California for gold, silver, and lead,
and then dumped mercury, arsenic, and other toxins
into rivers and lakes.

But it's not all doom and gloom in California,
because its people are resilient and not afraid to
acknowledge its dark past and make things better.

Surviving members of the Chumash Tribe
have been given compensation which they used to
build successful businesses.

Chinese immigrants survived the anti-Chinese tide,
saw the repeal of anti-Chinese laws,
and built vibrant communities.

Californians also worked hard to
clean up their environment,
preserved its nature by establishing national parks,
created government agencies to protect the coastline,
and passed the strongest environmental protection laws in the country.

Thus, even though the light goes out
in California every once in a while,
it still sets a great example for people around the world,
because it's not afraid to confront the darkness
and fix itself.

First Place

I, Malala

By Amelia Tay, Singapore

Every morning I wake up,
looking into his loving eyes.
I know I'm a girl, but
Papa treats me no less than a boy.
Papa was a teacher,
teaching in a school for girls,
so every day I went to school,
and learnt about the world.

Then came the Taliban,
who took the village from us.
The wicked men banned many things,
even watching TV and music.
They dealt out harsh punishments,
to all who disobeyed.
I was only eleven then,
and had to stop my education.

But anger clouded my mind,
it was so unfair,
that every boy could go to school,
when we girls were not allowed to.
I realised I had to take action,
so I spoke out everywhere I could,
on behalf of girls and our right to learn,
and defiantly went back to school.

Then the fateful day came.
On my way home from school,
a masked man boarded the bus,
"Who is Malala?"
My heart beating furiously,
I tried to hide frantically.
A bright flash, a bang
and pain engulfed my head.

I woke up to strange faces,
all smiling at me,
"Am I in heaven?"
"No," they said.
Not heaven or home,
I was in a strange place,
called Birmingham.
What is going to happen next?

In and out of surgeries,
I was finally complete.
I joined the rest of my family,
our new home now England.
Happy to be reunited,
but I still had to choose,
To live a quiet life,
or go on with my fight.

With support of my family,
We set up Malala fund,
to give each girl an opportunity,
to achieve what she desires.
December 2014,
Unexpected exciting news,
I am the youngest Nobel laureate!
My family beams with pride.

I am back in school again,
reading at grand, old Oxford,
but I have not forgotten,
the girls still not in school.
I travel to many countries,
How my heart is aching,
to see so many girls,
missing out on schooling.

Despite all of my efforts,
I cannot help everyone.
130 million girls
still get no education.
I have tried my best,
and had some small success,
but the fight for our right,
has not yet ended.

Second Place

Water Wishes

Pavana Attonito, Darien, Connecticut

Splash! Splash!
Something big
Splash! Splash!
Big blue
The Ocean's waves roll to me
Splashing.
A flick of shiny, silver scales
Through the clear thing
The seaweed is swaying,
Sliding around like an otter
Splash! Splash!
The dolphin jumps
Splash! Splash!
The whale sprays
Splash! Splash!
The otter rolls
The Ocean whispers in my ear
It washes a treasure to the shore for me-
Shells!
The water wishes for me to stay
Splash! Splash!
So I do
I hear the secrets,
The stories,
That it has to tell
If a crab snaps, my friend will save me
I have someone to trust
The sand - not so much
I jump into the waves,
But suddenly I fall!
Am I drowning?
But then I feel a wet, cold hand grab me,
Pull me to the top of the water
To shore.
The Ocean saved me,
My beloved friend.

Second Place

Butterfly

By Sio Huang Lee, Singapore

Seven amber leaves embracing a branch's tender hold.
Crystal dew drops on the leaves, brown bark shaded bronze and gold.
First light banishing darkness in their eternal warring.
Lights and dew drops, myriads of colours, shadowing my wings.
For I am the last butterfly, in the last breaths of fall.
One leaf falls.

On sunlit wings I fly, prospecting golden nectar.
Not a blossom petal, neither hither nor yonder.
To resignation, I spurn so further must I fly.
Finally a single white lily comes, in sight but sigh.
Not a butterfly, one tear roll down but not one more.
And one leaf falls.

Barely a single sound not even a bird shriek.
Sound silenced, amidst the forest lively speak.
The emerald blanket turned into a red carpet.
Only things left: my tree and my floret.
Take a sip of my nectar, gazed afore.
Another leaf falls.

I take flight. Winced in torment.
No one hears. My cry of silence.
No one to my succour. Thorns and torn.
What is a rose. Without its thorns.
Life not worthless. Because I'm torn.
But one leaf falls.

In need of rest. No never.
I need. To get to my tree.
The light. Dimmer than. Before.
The wind. Pushing me. Cruelly.
But no. To fly on. I will.
Then one leaf falls.

Nearly. There cannot rest.
Must. Reach. Home. Before. Night.
The. Moon. Has. Started. Rising.
Need. To. Fly. I'm. Reaching.
Finally. I reach. My. Home.
As one leaf falls.

And at last I can sigh.
No need to hold breath.
The stars are all my lanterns.
On the inky road of death.
So the last leaf falls.

Third Place

A Connection Unforgotten
By Jacinth Tan, Singapore

The foetus in Mother's womb,
was developing,
growing day by day.
The two people, Mother and Son,
were connected by the umbilical cord --
the bridge to her Son's life.
The day her new Son came into
our world, the umbilical cord was cut,
the bridge broken.
Instead, a new bridge, invisible, was forged
between Mother and Son, and
Mother wept tears of joy.

The first few years of her Son's life,
Mother took care of him.
As a baby, she nursed him with her milk,
gazing at him, with loving eyes.
As a toddler, she taught him patiently
how to walk, how to talk, and
cuddled him close every night.
The bridge got stronger by the day, and
so did the bond between them,
especially when her Son learnt something new and
Mother would cry,
tears of pure ecstasy and love.

Being a child was difficult,
But for her Son, Mother was there as his beacon of light —
a lamp in the dark.
Being there for him, when tears brimmed his brown orbs,
when he had to leave for primary school, or
when he did not ace his test.
When good news came around,
they huddled and cried happily.
At this stage, their bridge was at the pinnacle of strength,
it could weather any storm.

Alas, for the boy, teenage rebellion was at its peak.
He rebutted everything and anything that Mother said.
This caused many fights and quarrels.
Their bridge faded fast and furious.
One day, in his great acrimony,
her teenage Son flung open the door and ran away.
Mother felt like a monster was clawing her heart open and
tearing their bridge.
She cried,
rivulets of tears, slowly cascading down her once rosy face,
now creased with lines of worry for her Son.

Ten years had passed.
Mother sat on her sofa, and
glimpsed into her handheld mirror.
Her once pearl-white, radiant face glowing with energy,
had drastically changed into that of a frail old woman.
Tear marks clouded her puffy red eyes.
She gasped, choking occasionally.
She lay limply on the sofa,
still very much alive.
The door flung open, and
a well-dressed businessman, bearing features like hers,
burst in, sweeping the old lady into a hug.
Both weeping, tears of sadness, joy, hurt, regret... and
finally the bridge was restored.

At that very moment, Mother realised how much she meant
to her Son.
He treasured her like 24-carat gold.
He loved her with all his might.
She found her true worth –
a loving, kind Mother to her Son,
the One who had cared for him before he was even born,
the One who had raised him from an infant,
the One who was always there for him.
She was the unforgettable One to her Son.

Indeed, it is hard to find your true worth,
but once found,
never forgotten.

Ages 11-12

First Place

Jane Therese Ng

Age 11

Singapore

“Fading Beauty”

Callum Wyer

Age 12

Houston, TX

USA

“The Legend of the Merry Turkey Ghost”

Second Place

Aisha Mohammed Ebrahim Alkhalifa

Age 12

Riffa, Bahrain

“The Victims”

Parinita Chandrashekar

Age 12

Bridgewater, NJ

USA

“Eagerness About My First Pet”

Shannen Wee Shaen Heng

Age 12

Singapore

“Pride and Prejudice”

Third Place

Sarah Ding

Age 12

Creve Coeur, MO

USA

“I Transcend to the End”

First Place

Fading Beauty

By Jane Therese Ng, Singapore

bright green scales flecked with colour
kissing the stone-cold floor, sliding, slithering
forked tongue flicking across the air, onyx eyes flashing
jaws wide, venom-tipped fangs
glistening in the white moonlight, lunging towards---
 nothing
because there is only an empty boot.

paws outstretched, sniffing
hesitant but more curious
a new tree? Sure.
click
a loud thud, soil staining dark red, life desperately clinging on
but he did nothing to them
was the cost of the seemingly scary figure its own life?
or, did curiosity kill the bear, then?

blues, greys and whites decorated my plumage
a snippet of the never-ending sky
I flew
 but
no, they were gone
the trees, my nest and---
the bird whose
dulled blue wing lay, broken, under a branch.

light danced off my shell
a serenade with
the work of time and art, moulded and carved by Nature herself
but sinking down to the ocean floor
as I drowned
because of the plastic lodged in my throat
and there light danced no more.

a loud trumpet
a shout of defiance, a battle cry
a promise to take back what was hers, her family's
the last I remembered of my mother
before death claimed her
the bloody stumps where her tusks would have been
clotting, flies and birds pecking at the wound.

what really did
make me, the pangolin, so covetable?
I am surrounded by animals like myself
yet somehow, they preferred my meat
my scales were better for medicine
 apparently
I thought as I dug apart the termite mound with my hard claws
flicking my tongue out to catch the scurrying insects.

all these
 amazing
beautiful
intelligent
affectionate
lively
helpful
curious
unique
magical
animals
are dying
because of us
if we do not
stop and do something about it
they will disappear from the face of earth
then we too
may become extinct.

First Place

The Legend of the Merry Turkey Ghost
By Callum Wyer, Houston, TX

'Twas the night before Halloween, when all through the land,
Shops put up Christmas decorations.

No one could quite understand.

But then a wise old man stood up and declared,
"The Merry Turkey Ghost is coming!
We must be prepared!

From October to December, the Merry Turkey Ghost will appear.
He will bring trick or treat candy, Thanksgiving dinner,
and Christmas cheer!"

So the townsfolk rushed away to decorate their homes,
With pumpkins, tinsel, turkeys, Christmas trees,
and skeleton bones.

The children hung trick or treat bags and stockings by the door,
And stuffed their bellies with roast turkey, mashed potatoes, and pies
'til they could eat no more.

And every night from October 31 to December 24...
the children would dream
Of turkey ghosts with halos and plumage of green.

It would visit each night while they were asleep,
Leaving Halloween candy, toys, and roast turkey meat.

But when December 25 came 'round,
it would visit no more.

Up on its broomstick it would fly out the front door,
With fuzzy red hat on its head and turkey waddle flappin' as it flew,
The Merry Turkey Ghost would call out,

"Ho! Ho! Ho! Gobble! Gobble! Boo!"

Second Place

The Victims

By Aisha Mohammed Ebrahim Alkhalifa, Riffa, Bahrain

I hear rough chains scratching and echoing nearby
They shiver and shake with every minor sound.
“Does this dark, alarming, locked room ever have a key?”
They’ve asked themselves a million times a day.
They fight for every breath,
Hoping that someday they would survive.

They pray to survive,
Just like a powerless victim.

Lions are chained
Gorillas are caged
Tigers are trained
Just for you to be entertained

Elephants are insulted
Monkeys are assaulted
Zebras are offended

Why aren’t we embarrassed?
Dolphins are wounded
Whales are murdered
Sea lions are tortured

Why aren’t you ashamed?
Animals go extinct,
In just a blink.
So please,
That is enough,
For us and for them.

Second Place

Eagerness About My First Pet

By Parinita Chandrashekar, Bridgewater, NJ

My dad said yesterday
That I could go get a pet for my birthday.
I said thanks and gave him a hug,
Then started preparing my list.

Maybe I could get a pony.
But he would have to live in the stable.
An elephant would be fun,
Playing by spraying water all over me.

What if I get a squirrel, maybe.
Until he runs away behind nuts.
I think I could get along with a pig just right,
Rolling in mud all the time.

Perhaps I could get a giraffe.
It would be so much fun to feed him.
What about a hippopotamus? I thought.
For sure he must eat too much.

It would be fun to have a kangaroo.
Only if she has room for two.
I'm sure I don't want a porcupine.
Else I would be whining all the time.

How about a monkey?
Together we could swing from tree to tree.
Okay, maybe a giant spider,
He will make me scream even in dreams.

Finally, I gave my dad the list.
He patted me on my shoulder,
And said a fish would be a good beginning,
With a smile.

Prejudice

Society will not accept me
It is a lie to say that
Others will still love me the same
Because no matter what
I am gay
I remind myself daily that
I am different and
The respect I receive is all a farce
I refuse to believe that
Every single human being is made to be loved
Because
There is often unwarranted prejudice against people like me
It is untrue that
My sexual orientation will be valued by others
Because deep down in my heart I know
This revelation makes all the difference
And that
My life will never be the same
Nobody could ever make me think that
This is an act of self-love
I realise that
There are stereotypes everywhere
It is a mere fantasy that
I will be embraced for who I am
Since
Even I am embarrassed by my own sexuality
No longer can I say that
I deserve to be proud and hold my head up high
Because
People like me ought to be shunned and ostracized
I will never be able to comprehend why
I merit acceptance and recognition
When
I will undeniably face rejection
How could I ever think that
I am entitled to freedom
Because the truth is
I am constantly haunted by social norms and mores
It is laughable to think that
There are open-minded and free souls on this planet of persecution and discrimination
When there are always encouraging individuals amongst the multitudes of naysayers
The atmosphere is brimming with cynicism and negativity
How could I be so naive to think that
There is self-awareness in owning my identity

Ditched by those who are true to me
 It is senseless to believe that I will be
 Appreciated and supported by others around me
 Because I know that I will forever be
 Encumbered by the burdening truth that I am a homosexual
 I will never see myself as being
 Accepted by others around me
 I will undoubtedly be deprecated and detested
 It is a fallacy to say that
 I am able to experience freedom
 And
 I no longer need to make excuses for myself
 Because after I have "burst down those closet doors once and for all"
 I shall have to live in fear of ridicule and scorn
 Therefore no one shall ever hear me utter that
 I should come out of the closet
 Perhaps it is time to understand that
 I need to hide from the community
 How could I say that
 I will definitely learn to acknowledge my sexuality
 Because
 I cannot overcome this barrier of fear
 It is ludicrous to think that
 There is hope in this biased society
 It is inevitable that
 I shall face abandonment from my loved ones once the cat is out of the bag
 Nothing can ever persuade me that
 I should unveil my true identity and be proud of who I am
 Because
 I am compelled to let my sexuality define me
 I shall never be able to rid myself of insecurities
 It is self-delusional to say that
 I know no one can make me feel inferior because
 My self-esteem is fast depleting and
 I would be lying to myself if I said that
 There are advantages of coming out
 Nobody will ever congratulate and support me
 And that
 My family will see me as a disgrace and failure
 It is simply stupid to even consider the fact that
 I was meant to be carefree and happy
 And
 I should never have to hide my true self from others
 I believe that
 No one in this whole world will stay by my side
 Who am I to assume that
 Humanity is capable of embracing diversity

Pride

↑↑

Now read from bottom up!

Third Place

I Transcend to the End

By Sarah Ding , Creve Coeur, MO

I bend my legs,
Tighten my grip,
Tap the ball forward,
Step backward,
Step forward,
Swing my stick down and through,
Hit the ball,
Watch it sail,
To the goal.

Goalie stops it,
Forward tips it,

And....

GOOOOAAAALLL!!!!

Field hockey game's tied 1-1,
Other team's being outdone,
Hustle and heart,
Set us apart,
Our team's on fire,
So hot we're not afraid,

To use our striving shot,

A super shot,

A sonic shot,

A **downright nasty** shot.

I hustle hit,
Never quit,
Pull a fake,
Pass it right,
Lose the ball
Win it back,
Tap it forward,
To the goal,
Take a shot,
Chip it hard,

Ball bounces,

Grazing feet,

Corner! Tweet!

Standing my ground,
At option left,
Ball speeding,
I'm receiving,
Touching outside circle,
Then back in,
Squatting down,
Squeezing stick,
Unleashing deadly hit!

Ball soars,
Towards goal,
Goalie falls,
On ball,
I score,
GOAL!

Four minutes left,
When I play ball,
I leave it all,
I defend,
To the end,
Try my best,
I don't rest,
Jab the ball from their control,
Pull a fake,
And then take,

Another of my dreadful hits!

Feel a shove,
I collapse,
Hear the ref,
Tweet! Stroke!

Minute left,
Pressure's on,
On the line,
Goalie and me,

Cannot hit,
Only push or lift,
Goalie stares,
I respond,
With stinging glares,
Goalie flinches,
I'm alone,
With the ball,

TWEET!

Anger surges I'm going to win,
I've practiced strokes 1,000 times,
I use my strength
I use my power,
I use my one last bit of fire,
I transcend to the end,
And push the ball to the place,
With superb, lightning pace,
The goalie lunges,
The crowd gasps,
I close my eyes,
Cross my fingers,
Hope for the best,
This is the test,
Everyone's silent,
So am I,
I hear a whistle,
Open my eyes,
Everyone cheers,
Sprinting towards me,
I score the stroke,
Goalie's sad,
Her coach complains,
I celebrate,

Walk to the podium,
Hear my name,
"Field Hockey Superstar!"
Crowd chants
"Sarah Ding!"
And
I let it ring!

Ages 13-15

First Place

Lilo Al-Dahwi
Age 13
El Paso, TX
USA
"Rebuilding Our World"

Pieta J. Mackle Bayley
Age 13
Christchurch, New Zealand
"Schrodinger's Cat Speaks"

Eric William Lee
Age 15
Jacksonville, FL
USA
"Through the Glass"

Jerry Rui Xiao
Age 13
Collierville, TN
USA
"An Ode to the Canyons"

Second Place

Deena Al-Dahwi
Age 13
El Paso, TX
USA
"My City...My Rose"

Kevin Patrick Forman
Age 14
Lake Forest, IL
USA
"Restoration"

Qianyu Lin
Age 13
Singapore
"Sad But True"

Amanda Mandi Zhou
Age 14
Memphis, TN
USA
"Unheard"

Third Place

Morgan Elizabeth Flodman
Age 14
Cherry Valley, MA
USA
"The Only Time"

Joey Si-En Hoe
Age 14
Singapore
"The Not-So-Perfect Path"

First Place

Rebuilding Our World

By Lilo Al-Dahwi , El Paso, TX

A blindfold has been placed over the world,
Into deep ignorance we have been hurled,
Through blindness we flail around,
Gunshots and bombs are the only sounds.

There are a few who squirm to break free,
To build for us an alternate destiny,
Padlocks of hate seize our feet and hands,
Whilst countries point weapons at other lands.

Grotesque sounds fill the air,
When a voice is needed there is silent despair,
But if through fear our voices are forgotten,
Society will remain tyrannical and rotten.

When a call for peace does come,
Citizens of the world decide to keep mum,
The world becomes a dark, awful abyss,
As we abandon peace and remain voiceless.

While we stand in vain and wait,
We continue to deny our inevitable fate,
Of appalling, senseless civil conflict,
By hate and distress we are being tricked.

Though we pretend that we have changed,
Astronomical improvements are yet to be arranged,
We must reconstruct a world that is humane,
Embrace equality, eliminate the pain.

Let's build the world's happily ever after,
With bricks made up of kindness and laughter,
A foundation of moral values, we can compile,
For future generations, a new world that's worthwhile!

Please, shed the hatred that obscures the human brain,
Choose peace to eradicate this endless pain,
Let's reconstruct life, with love as a vice
Speak out... Or the entire world will pay the ultimate price



First Place

Schrodinger's Cat Speaks

By Pieta Bayley, Christchurch, New Zealand

Author's note: *Where the poem splits into the dead and live cat, you can choose two ways to read it—both cats separately or together. This is to be able to tell the individual stories of both while still staying true to the theory that the live and dead cats happen at the same time. It also helps accentuate the fact that they are the same cat in different states of being.*

uprooted
from the corners of his mind
I am the alley cat
of neurological pathways
the streetlamps
are the light of firing neurons
the roads and backstreets
weave through the frontal lobe
he seals me in
a box like a prison
my only cellmates?
radiation
and a flask of poison

in the physicist's mind there are still flights of fancy - an imagination
my fur is made of the midnight sky
after all, what am I but pure dreams?
my tail curls and dances – a tendril of smoke
the radiation and poison are allies
engaged in a war against me
before this hour is up
they will have won
and though I will wear no visible signs of the battle I fought
my heart will be silent
a breath I never finished inhaling
frozen upon my lips
pure dreams
dead upon the floor of a sealed box
as I close my eyes the world blurs
who knows the outcome?
for I am nothing and everything
until
they open

I seem to hold the world in my eyes
and my teeth are sharpened ivory
as a fabrication of the human mind
one wonders – am I truly real?
my deadly companions remain dormant
perhaps they are waiting to pounce?
I will be ready
my enemies do not make a move
dare I hope that I may be
the 50% that lives?
my lungs expand, contract,
expand, contract
a cat who never truly existed
yet my heartbeat feels as real as ever
for a moment all defining lines disappear
colours bleed together - pure possibility –
everything and nothing
until
they open

the box

First Place

Through the Glass

By Eric William Lee, Jacksonville, FL

Vermillion mug hot against his palms
The robust steam of coffee
veils him from the chatter
From the detached teenagers
engrossed in screens
From the giggling children
crowding around cake
He drifts past the others
The familiar feeling of
only fitting in on the surface

Leaning against the window
like they used to do, together
Like he now does every year
to relive the end of the war

He exhales gently
his breath coating the window
like a pinch of salt in water
Blurring the reflection
of his medal-ridden uniform
As the raindrops on the other side
lazily carve out rivers

Through the glass
he sees the memory of
Four familiar glowing faces
amidst the dreariness
Each of their youthful steps rippling
the vast ponds
beneath their feet

Through the glass
he sees the memory of
Four grave faces watching
as the drill sergeant
(a man who had seen more than
the blue of his eyes could hold)
showered them with spittle

Through the glass
he sees the memory of
Four faces slapped by the sound of thunder
trekking boot-deep in mud
And although their layers of armor
should block bullets
it could not even block the rain

Through the glass
he sees the memory of
Four bloodied faces
momentarily illuminated in the night
by booming veins of lightning
But only one of them would
Hear the trumpets signaling triumph

Through the glass
he sees the memory of
Three marble white coffins
quietly swallowed by the earth
A final farewell
Everyone murmuring silent thank yous
But it was too late

Through the glass
he sees
His own wizening face
with nothing to accompany him but
his consuming thoughts and
his medals
cold and still against his chest

--Excuse me, sir?"

And suddenly
a gentle touch on his arm
clears his stupor

Wide brown eyes
stare at him wonderingly from
three rosy-cheeked, awed faces
A slice of celebration is presented to him
"Our parents told us you are a hero."
The voice of an angel
topped with overflowing curiosity

*They had never seen so many
shiny medals on a chest before*

*They had never seen a face
wearied by so many experiences before*

*They had never spoken to someone
who had sacrificed so much for the world
before*

*They had never met a hero
in real life before*

so--

"Would you please be our friend?"

And although he was no longer
living through the glass
the raindrops still fell
This time from his eyes

"I would love nothing more."

First Place

An Ode to The Canyons

By Jerry Rui Xiao, Collierville, TN

When in dawn the bright golden sun
Reveals its glistening rosy cheeks
On the bright oxide steeps of the canyon,
The snake twirling tangerine creek
Extends its infinite muddy tentacle
To the endless vast realms
The maze of cliffs, always so helical,
Grasps eternity and will always overwhelm
The endless confusions of humanity

And when the brave eagles glide gleefully,
The graceful singing water flows
In a flux of a rushing gully
And by the water the lichen glows

Finally the great towers stand unshook but lethargic,
Restful and weary of the times it was tramped upon
By Heaven's Eyes own rays and the heavily thick
Feet of the primordial beasts that stepped on
Mother Nature's very own berthed miracle

When the sun kisses the canyons goodbye,
The arising silhouettes of the towers
Finally sleep after a daylong pandemonium
The waters halt their serpentine ways
The eagle's pride decays
And the canyon awaits its next light of hope

Second Place

My City...My Rose

By Deena Al-Dahwi, El Paso, TX



My beautiful birth city of El Paso,
A rose, blooming with warmth and light,
With an inclusive, affable atmosphere,
Its diversity...the foundation of its might.

Many people of all ethnicities,
Combine in this loving community,
Ingrained in our culture is inclusiveness,
Graciousness, respect, and amiability.

But this summer of 2019,
A criminal invades... unwelcome by all,
Shooting the innocent: youth and elderly,
Finding heartless joy in watching them fall,

With the devil whispering in his ear,
This coward, this VILLAIN, kills twenty-two,
His sole objective: spreading hatred,
Instilling fear and divisiveness too.

This summer of 2019,
My rose is ravaged, its petals are seized,
The core of this delicate rose is devastated,
Appearing withered... torn and diseased,

Every heart in El Paso is shattered,
The fragments melting into a pool of sorrow,
This senseless, heartless, despicable act,
Might it lead to an appalling tomorrow?

A piece of all of us dies with the victims,
A cloud of longing resting above,
Pain flashes throughout the community,
As we remember the dead with sorrow, yet love,

Caught is the murderer, the vile killer,
Racism and violence were his foundation,
His sick belief: "Diversity is unacceptable,
Only one race should reside in our nation".

Little does the ignorant murderer know,
El Paso is a family- we are very strong!
The binds connecting us are impenetrable,
Whatever race, color or religion: You belong!

Stories emerge of El Paso heroes,
Brown, black and white... risking all,
Facing the possibility of losing their lives,
Rather than watching others fall

The injured and families of those who passed,
Are showered in prayers, support and care,
A community of all backgrounds helps each other,
Standing together, we slowly repair,

My rose begins to recover,
Its petals blooming once more,
Love's nutrition helps it grow stronger,
Even stronger than it was before,

This united, powerful family,
Diverse as we are, together we're proud,
Forming a barrier, withstanding the forces...
Against violence-- our voices are loud!

The evil murderer completely failed,
El Paso's binds remain intact,
As one city, united, indivisible,
Only in true harmony, will we act.

because we are ... **#ElPasoStrong!**

In loving memory of: Jordan Anchondo, Andre Anchondo, Arturo Benavides, Mario de Alba, Javier Amir Rodriguez, Leo Campos, Maribel Hernandez, David Johnson, Angie Englisbee, Maria Flores, Raul Flores, Elsa Marquez, Luis Juarez, Margie Reckard, Sara Moriel, Adolfo Hernández, Jorge García, Elsa Marquez, Gloria Márquez, María Rothe, Juan Chairez, Ivan Manzano, Teresa Sanchez, and Alexander Hoffman.

Victims of the El Paso Shooting- 2019. **May they all rest in peace.**

Second Place

Restoration

By Kevin Forman, Lake Forest, IL

In olden days, or so it's said
Spaceships flew around one's head
On any day they could be found
Circling the planet round
I couldn't say with verity
I'd seen a ship with clarity
All that exists that I could find
Were blurry pictures to remind
Us of those days before the storm
Before the chaos and the swarm
And so much of our history
Was now naught but a mystery
And so I set to search, to seek
The past which I found so unique.

The past, it seemed, was locked from me
All leads just led to secrecy
Every way I stepped, every glance I took
The past held tight like a stubborn crook
Who wished not to divulge the crime
And so I waited, bode my time.

For years I sat perusing tomes
Searching through to find the domes
Within which ancient spaceships lay
But nothing led without delay
So here I am, several decades on
My quest to find out the past beyond
And still I yearn for discovery
The spaceships of ancient memory
And perhaps someday I will
I know I shan't stop seeking 'til
I need to know what happened then
So I can bring it back again
And restore the world from this state
Fix everything, and clear the slate.

Second Place

Sad But True

By Qianyu Lin, Singapore

I was five
When they shot down my mother,
And took her away from me.

It was a sunny day,
Marshmallow clouds,
Azure sky,
The sweet air of early spring.
I walked beside my mother
As we listened
To the sweet birds that sing.

A gun was shot!
With a startled cry
My avian friends took flight.
My mother howled,
And told me to run,
As the shouts of men
Drew near.

The guns were raised!
“Get the elephant!” they shout.
Ropes were flung around me.
I cried,
And clung to my mother.

She screamed
And tried
To pull me away from them.
“Take me instead!”
I heard her shout,
“And leave my darling be!”

But a shot was fired.
A metal bullet
Pierced her side.
And as they
The cruel men,
The heartless men
Tore her away from me,
I watched her fall lifeless
To the ground.

They took me to a place,
To a metal cage
Where my Freedom was chained.

“Circus,” they say,
“A place of joy and fun.”
Well, not for me, certainly.

I had to work for the cruel men
who had Mother’s blood
On their merciless hands.
I hated them.
But what could I do?

At night,
I squirmed in my restricted cage.
Hungry, thirsty
And full of rage.

I dreamed of her,
Mother.

I remembered
That she smelled of the African Plains,
Of the grass of Spring,
Of home.

We used to fan each other
With our large ears,
In the warm summer evening.
We used to lie down beside each other
All through the winter nights.
We played with water, counted stars...

Family, love, happiness,
Just Mother and me.
Until these ruthless creatures
Robbed me of peace.

Now my mother is in the grave.
And I?
Worse than dead.

But what choice do I have?
What choice?
What power against men
With their powerful whips and deadly guns?

~

Five months later,
I sat in a cage on the moving train.
As it goes into a town.
“The circus is coming to town!”
Children were shouting,
Tugging at parents’ sleeves.

They think circuses are fun,
And dear reader, you might think so too.
But what is the price
We elephants have to pay,
To put up a show for you to enjoy?

I’ll tell you what price:
The price of Pain.

Of agony,
Torture,
Inflicted by whips.
Harsh words,
Rude scoldings.
Musty stalls
With no space to sleep.
And the pain,
The pain,
Of having no choice
But to bow down to
Mother’s murderers.

My first performance:
I sit on the stool
As men barked to us like tyrants.
Sympathetic readers,
Men hate tyrants, don’t they?
So why are they being so tyrannical
To us?
What have we done
To deserve this?
Why?

“Kneel!”
The man barks to me.
I hesitate.
“Don’t give him satisfaction,”
I think.
Then the whip hit my back,
I groan with pain.
Reluctantly
I prostrate myself
Before the disgusting creature.

The crowd roars,
The man bows.
Children laugh,
Adults cheer.

Despicable men.
Atrocious.
The shame stings.

I feel powerless.
So powerless.
“Stand!”
The man commands.
I rise slowly to my knees,
Only to be whipped again.

“Slower, lazier,
Than a crippled old man,”
The man says.
The audience laughs.

This is madness.

We just want respect,
Respect and dignity.
Or is that too much to ask?

Second Place

Unheard

By Amanda Mandi Zhou, Memphis, TN

Her voice,
muted out.
they're blocking her mouth
muffled by the number of hands,
it's a number game where she loses.
She screams out what's right,
desperate for them to hear her
She screams it out until her vocal box is torn into pieces, falling to the ground
shattered, like a bullet just hit glass
it falls like petals, dancing in the wind
they give her disgusted looks
She pleads to them to listen
that she should get a chance to speak
it's equality
the world should let men and women be equal.
they tell her to shut up,
it will never happen.
they have it planted in their minds
the superiority
buried under
not to be dug up
planted by a man of manipulation.
She's underwater, no one can hear her
She's drowning alone in her thoughts
her voice
their voices

but she's not alone,
she is with me
and she is still fighting to breathe
with a fire in her eyes
I grab her hand, and she knows
I'm fortifying her,
with all of my strength

if she were a fire she could leave them to be nothing but ashes
if she were silence she could strangle them until their breath stops
if she were the great big ocean, she could overflow their lungs with water
if she were a man, her voice could ring in their ears
but she is not.
but I am not.
we are girls
little girls who have a voice that can't be heard
but together,
our voices combined are a roaring, unstoppable force

we thought we were girls who can only cry and sit and watch
maybe one voice is too faint
but all of ours together,
can shake the world

Third Place

The Only Time

By Morgan Flodman, Cherry Valley, MA

The only time
when knees should fall
is in the playroom
where kiddies crawl
or by flushing gardens
with fruitful seeds
and maybe in prayer
for neighbors' needs.

The only time
when tears should trill
is while bearer births
and babe yelps at will,
to Mendelssohn's tune
of passionate pledge
moreover with the ferment
of skidding on a sledge.

The only time
when feet should escape
is from hide n' seek
to a mellow chocolate crepe,
and when visiting confidants,
hugs, kisses, and such,
to view future acquaintances
who deem rapture as much.

The only time
when tones should yell
is to hearten your folks,
"I love you as well!"
easily expressing notions
candid, clean, and bright,
sharing faiths, memories,
merriment throughout the light!

Third Place

The Not-So-Perfect Path
By Joey Si-En Hoe, Singapore

My heart aches with memories of dreams left unfulfilled, and
the road I tread on is cracked. My feet fly as always,
ignoring the time draining away in my wake, and the
words in the histories of the future my name has yet to touch.

In this modern society, we say we are made of clay, we are young and malleable.
In this ruthless imitation of nature, we strain to shape ourselves into perfection.

Many choose to stay within their molds until they learn to fit.
We want to think that we are the dawn of a never-ending day,
yet refuse to acknowledge that fires must die and stars will
extinguish. We mark down days to fame, yearning for the
sweat-streaked gold medal at the end of the road.

This is how we spend our lives: freeing our hands to stay
ahead in this ruthless race of fairground rides, where to
us nothing matters more than marking stamps off collector
cards, a trade for the final prize.

If only we would take our eyes off the track and throw aside
These meticulously plotted trails. I cannot stay on this factory
line, and allow the youth on our faces to melt into despair,
knowing we cannot stop the inexorable march of time from
draining the hundred suns in our eyes into lone embers
or worse, reduced to nothing more than voids.

I wish I could be taught to turn my eyes away
from the intangible, fire-formed concept that
delineates the wizened cities of the sky in liquid gold,
to be taught that the air is not an element and it
will never be part of us, to know that to dance on cloud-light cream
will remain an unchecked slot on our list of goals.

The time we spend here is not a race:
it is a pencil and a blank sheet of paper, where we will
plunge into ghosts of ideas not yet written and bring back our
treasures from beneath the heaving sea.
Our legacy can be more than knowing the view from this and that podium,
and the brutal fight for it, to be remembered as a slave to
the clock and a library for lost ideas.

An unspoken statement darkens the air,
And I, captive of my time and victim of a future I cannot see
Can only wonder if I will dare to change.

Now I refuse to lose myself, because perfection is no more than a reverie.

Ages 16-18

First Place

Sally S. Park
Age 16
Fairfax, VA
USA
“In My Grandfather’s Attic”

Maggie Wang
Age 17
Blacksburg, VA
USA
“Eulogies”

E Wen Wong
Age 16
Christchurch, New Zealand
“A City Made of Roads”

Second Place

Michelle Joy Fuksbrumer
Age 17
Teaneck, NJ
USA
“Garden’s Blossoms”

Sarah Jin Ying Khoo
Age 16
Singapore
“See It For Yourself”

Kenny Kim
Age 16
Roslyn, NY
USA
“Night Ritual”

Chaemin Jung
Age 16
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic
“About Chinchillas XV: An Homage to
‘About Angels IX’ by Homero Aridjis”

Third Place

Kevin Kong
Age 16
Jupiter, FL
USA
“New York Sheep”

First Place

In My Grandfather's Attic
By Sally S. Park, Fairfax, VA

i was rummaging through my grandfather's wooden attic:
crinkled stamps, vintage items, & leather photo albums
filled with words my tongue couldn't seem to enunciate.
"it's been 30 years since someone was here," my grandfather croaked
as i flipped through a photo album,
filled with empty clear pockets where she used to be.
i traced my finger around the illegible scribbling on its plastic creases...
the ashes of burnt leather accumulating on my finger
erases existing memories of her.

my dad tells me he still sees her sometimes
as a figment of his imagination.
she would be in his dreams, riding a rusty blue bike through a field of her favorite flowers
(*mugunghwa* or *hibiscus syriacus* to be exact)
with rosy cheeks, long silky black hair, & a honey-sweet smile
— simply letting him know that she's safe and waiting...

"don't remind your grandfather of her though— he has long forgotten about her..."
my dad warned me as he smoothed out a crinkled black & white photo of her in his wallet.

i was rummaging through my grandfather's wooden attic:
crinkled stamps, vintage items, & leather photo albums
filled with words my tongue couldn't seem to enunciate.
burnt leather that erases existing memories of her,
but at the corner of the attic, above the bundle of abandoned leather photo albums, was a
single plucked *mugunghwa*.
the pink pigment radiates nostalgia from the gray murky attic, seemingly out of place from
its surroundings
hasn't it been 30 years?

my mind floated towards the garden of pink *mugunghwas*
that my grandfather has religiously cared for everyday at dawn.
i was rummaging through my grandfather's wooden attic:
crinkled stamps, vintage items, & leather photo albums
filled with words my tongue couldn't seem to enunciate.
attempts to erase past memories but with no avail.
it's been 30 years & she's long gone
but never forgotten
with a single pink *mugunghwa* as tangible proof.

First Place

Eulogies

By Maggie Wang, Blacksburg, VA

i. refugee

in autumn, we watch the birds migrate, our faces
pressed against rusted wire fences, awestruck.
our eyes trace the silhouettes of freedom,
gazes searching for some hidden key to flight.
we cradle fragile dreams like new-lain eggs,
our buried other selves crying out for foreign reliefs.
at night, we haunt ourselves with unanswered
prayers, unsung verses of anthems falsely ours.
in the mornings, we wake to tears the taste of rain,
salt for injuries of homelands too soon departed.

ii. naturalist

in autumn, we watch the birds migrate, their hearts
beating the rare kept promise against hollow bones.
we dance to their rhythm, our music at once
folk song and Fantaisie Impromptu.
we breathe the air that kisses their feathers, our lips
stained with their eternal and sacred truth.
their calls reach us as echoed pleas, wills for some
distant acquaintance and drafts of unwritten histories.
with each passing, we learn their names anew,
our shoulders draped in the colors of their kinship.

iii. sovereign

in autumn, we watch the birds migrate, our hair
twined with gold fallen from their wings.
we crown them with untranslatable names and
paint their portraits in long and lonely afterlives.
we follow them beneath the new moon, let their
bodies cloud over darkness with noble light.
we look to them for impossible prophecies and
slaughter them to make them immortal.
they call us strangers and guests and friends,
and we answer in riddles and ciphertext.

iv. martyr

in autumn, we watch the birds migrate, their flesh
sweet on our tongues like honey and ambrosia.
they shed their virgin fears for our bullets, then
vanish into clouds of smoke and dust and memory.
they traverse continents and oceans for us,
defenseless warriors as old as the universe before ours.
we hold them in our palms, baptize them in the blood of
a thousand wild berries—rituals of godless men.
they seek some peace we do not understand,
some language we do not have the voice to speak.

v. poet

in autumn, we watch the birds migrate, our fingers
braiding their fallen hopes into quill tips.
our verses etch their likenesses against
thundering skies, dark and golden and wondrous.
our voices sing a silent counterpart to theirs,
each tuplet an early frost to suffocate their flowers.
our lips cast shadows into their paths—clouds to
water new blossoms—but we are not of their blood.
we catch their falling rhymes like snowflakes
and weave them into our long-lost tapestries.

First Place

A City Made of Roads

By E Wen Wong, Christchurch, New Zealand

if our city was made of roads
shadows would taint them with guilty silhouettes
trees would cloak them in marmalade leaves
salt would mask the centreline

in the city
bruised hearts would weave through midnight traffic
wearing themselves like brief glissandos
passing as perfume of pink petunias
seeping through pores of asphalt

perhaps
between the sky and the sea
dips of concrete would hold lost tears
a new road
a parallel park
empty space waits
for approval

under its weight
the paintings, potted plants
simple splices of symmetry
we would build the pavement of patterned paths
the roads would yield a single umbrella
the words to hold up our city

Second Place

Garden's Blossoms

By Michelle Joy Fuksbrumer, Teaneck, NJ

barren land that was once pregnant
with lilacs and April dew has emptied
her lot and left desolation
forget-me-not snow has faded like bruises
wet patches dried up and left wrinkled
shadows of green.

when we danced to the garden
we picked yellow flowers from the sprouting ground
and you called me sunshine girl
we stumbled home after dark with a stem tucked
behind my ear (I ignored the scratches it left and the bits of dried blood)
my arms were full of roses and eyes were dull bronze pennies.

my torso aches from being stretched between life and death
I am an elongated creature
and spread thin over dust rising into watering eyes
(water! water! they cry, but the salt is bitter and deathly)
hanging over the precipice
am I holding on or slowly letting go?

death can erase even the most terrible of sins,
I sing to the river
the river murmurs back to me: death also erases the deepest of loves
but shallow river, what do you know of depth? I cry.
I see pools in his eyes and I float in them at will
the river laughed, child, do you understand I flow from the ocean?

I wonder if frost will encase the infertile ground
and render her useless
can budding blooms overcome winter's soft beckons
my pine trees are evergreens and my peonies become pansies
I plant gardens in my bones and sell them my sunshine
you called me yellow then but my ice is creeping and covering
April is over now.

Second Place

See It For Yourself

By Sarah Jin Ying Khoo, Singapore

The world sees you
Unremarkable, a big failure.
You are nobody
Soon to be forgotten

Others are big shots,
You're just a small ant.
That's why the world deems you
A great big failure.

The world sees you
Ignorant, a big failure.
No academic credentials
The bottom of the barrel

Others receive prestigious awards,
You attend unostentatious remedial sessions.
That's why the world deems you
A great big failure.

The world sees you
Uncool, a big failure.
Neither a pretty face nor a slender figure
No trendy prints or limited edition sneakers

Others have more than a million followers,
You barely have a hundred
That's why the world deems you
A great big failure.

The world sees you
Hard up, a big failure
Chanel, Gucci, Hermès,
These treasures are never found in your possession

Others live comfortably in glorious riches,
You have nothing to your name.
That's why the world deems you
A great big failure.

The hurt and the pain,
The sorrow and the shame.
Whatever you do
Seems never enough.

But before you try
To escape this hard-knock life
Look again
This time, through my eyes.

I see you
Remarkable, a big inspiration.
You are someone
A legacy to be remembered

Others are outstanding,
But you are one of a kind.
That's why you are
A great inspiration.

I see you
Talented, a big inspiration.
The cream of the crop
Even without attaining distinction

Others may be intellectuals,
But you're a jack of all trades.
That's why you are
A great inspiration.

I see you
Cool, a big inspiration.
It doesn't matter if you're a plain Jane
Because you have the biggest heart of all

You don't need followers to prove,
That people love you for who you are.
That's why you are
A great inspiration.

I see you
Rich, a big inspiration.
Working, volunteering, mentoring
In order to give and support the people in need

You do so much for little return,
Sharing your blessings and making a difference
That's why you are
A great inspiration.
Never give up,
Never give in.
Always remember
The world has no say.

Take heart, my friend
Hold your head up high
And may you eventually realize
Your true worth.

Second Place

Night Ritual

By Kenny Kim, Roslyn, NY

The sun settles slowly below the horizon
I enter my home after a long hard day of toil.
Then I change into my comfortable clothes, yawning and stretching.
The moon suddenly overtakes the skies, commanding all of life to retreat.

I start to take deep breaths and clear my mind.
Work, stress, friends, all expelled from my thoughts.
I smile, snuggling my feet into a pair of worn out shoes.
On the other side of the door, a world of freedom awaits.
I step outside into the blackened skies,
Blanketed by the stars and cushioned by the clouds

A rush of cold wind gently coats around my face,
Alerting all of my senses.
Moonlight strikes me hard, but I look back, embracing its beautiful gleam.
And as I take the first step,
My mind starts blood throughout the body
Then I launch myself, first a few yards
But soon after I run a few miles, my body collapses,
And my legs drift towards the sky effortlessly

My mind leaves to a cosmic dream
A stream of gust trails behind me,
And an endless path of stars is illuminated in front of me;
Everything around me churns like colors in a painting
But soon a stronger light blinds me as I rest

My resting body suddenly aches with pain,
Slowly dwindling my run.
I have no choice but to give in to the light,
And so I wake up to the porch lights in front of me.
I feel refreshed, refined,
But I am back in reality.
Using every last bit of energy, I enter my home
And go to sleep.

Second Place

About Chinchillas XV

(An Homage to "About Angels IX," by Homero Aridjis)

By Chaemin Jung, Santo Domingo, Dominica Republic

Through the night, wrapped in warmth,
The chinchillas roam around their oasis in Huacachina.
Like wealthy mole rats, these chinchillas
keep a flotilla—no to the taste of vanilla.
Superimposed, they huddle through the night—a fluffy carpet.

The sky molds into a light blue. The first rays of sunlight
Touches a cluster of grey paws, feisty to hurry and thaw. 'Twas
The day these chinchillas rumbled their engines and took off:
Warn humans—mess with us and we'll kill ya.
Not cute anymore—a rodeo gang of chinchillas.

The eight o' clock sun rouses some early morning trappers,
Who in their villa load pistols for some fur coats maravillas.
As the chinchillas horde motorcades over the ground mozzarella,
A bullet zips past and sprays the sand behind them. The chinchillas
roar and charge—you done screwed up didn't ya?
Brandishing knives and daggers, their beady eyes convey death.

It is noon. In the perfect silence, a skull
grins up at the sky, and caws respond. Splattered
gringo stains the beige desert—parmesan spaghetti.
The chinchillas lick raspberry off their paws and rave
around man, swaying their forepaws in the air.

The mink jots notes.

Third Place

New York Sheep

By Kevin Kong, Jupiter, FL

call to the
zodiac, nothing but a
part of the sky. Why christen
him *horns* when
they blare dissonant
in the city? These streets hold a
celestial being where bikes screech
like cackles of crows, tremors within. This wool
is menaced by fingers, bladed grass. Wait
for green to
become black. Dusk
and the city inspects you. Its buildings say
fear my dark alleys. The streetlamps pulsate
yellow, skin clenched. Keep your bodies distanced
from lightbulbs
in this free land. Leave melodies too familiar
for a flock
jailed. A body framed
next to broken windows. Of people, homeless, guided
down avenues. Spare all alien bodies stained
mundane. The stature of such New Yorker creatures
confronted by shadows
more built than themselves. Shear the cloak of night
in its own riot
identity. Stars fall
skyscrapers, daggers in the sky
protect this indomitable fortress. Your remains of mercy
littered with weeds
a sforzando left extended. Hear the bells
ring of such liberties
verdure block: a hub of the east coast
and within the subways
they cower.

Short Stories

Ages 8-10

First Place

Sio Huang Lee

Age 10

Singapore

“Little Boxes”

Su Ern Kimi Ong

Age 9

Singapore

“A Mother’s Love”

Second Place

Shilian Sun

Age 10

Singapore

“True Love Against Time”

Kaydon Arianne Tan

Age 10

Singapore

“The Princess and the Pearl”

Third Place

Avah Dodson

Age 11

Lafayette, CA

USA

“The Bomb Squad”

Richelle Yu Fang Ng

Age 10

Singapore

“A Surprise Date”

First Place

Sio Huang Lee, Singapore
"Little Boxes"

Little boxes. Little boxes. My room is filled with little boxes. All the important things to me are within them. My life is full of little boxes. But why so many? This is my story.

School ended. My feet dragging along the sidewalks, echoing down the lonely walk home, my heart heavy. After I got home, I told my parents that I had misbehaved. My father's hopeful expression melted away.

Fury contorted his face as he said, "You did it again?"

Tears streamed down my face as I begged him not to throw away my drawings. However, my efforts were to no avail. My father took my favourite drawings and tore them up, piece by piece, shred by shred, and threw them into the rubbish bin. I screamed and cried. The agony of my drawings getting thrown away ripped me apart. An agony like a piercing knife. Instantaneous and vicious.

But given time it should have healed, scarred but healed. However, my pain never left, a lingering ravenous monster that refused to leave, eating away at my soul, eating away the core of my being, always eating until I am hollow.

I kept shouting at the monster "Get out! Get out!"

But always, all that he ever did was to smile at me sweetly, insidiously whilst gurgling insanely, "Little boxes. Little boxes."

Strangely, irrationally, I always left him alone. Little boxes. Little boxes.

Days passed and I began to lose more and more things that were precious to me. Besides that, the Lost and Found box in the classroom was emptied away each day before I could check it. The desperation and hope of finding my lost things grew and grew like a hungry flame, only to be extinguished when I gave up hope of ever finding them again.

As the flames of hope spluttered out, once again all that I had left was my monster chanting "Little boxes. Little boxes."

The year after that, I convinced myself that maybe, just maybe, if I did not throw away anything, then it would be as if I had gotten my things back. At this thought, my spirits lifted. I did not foresee the slippery slope I was hurtling down on. A slippery slope that ended in a precipice, falling into an abyss of little boxes.

Slowly, very slowly, I began to keep more and more things. I began putting them into little boxes. Everything seemed to be shouting at me.

“Little boxes! Little boxes!” Every time I tore off a sheet of my calendar, I would hear it cry, “Little boxes! Little boxes!”

Hurriedly, I would stuff the sheet of paper into the nearest box which was filled with papers from previous days. But after a while, my longings to recover my precious lost things was overwhelmed by my inane urge to not throw away anything and soon my room was just a box of little boxes.

Occasionally, in rare moments of clarity and sanity, I asked myself why I was doing this. Maybe it was because I knew that my things had loved me and protected me dearly, so I wanted to show my appreciation back to them. Or maybe, lately, since I had been arguing with my mother so often that I felt that she did not love me, I needed something to fill up the gap in my heart.

Till now, I still heard those words, “Little boxes. Little boxes.”

But wait. They seemed a little softer. Maybe, it was because I had found the reason for my behaviour.

One day, my mother told me that I had disposophobia. However, I did not care. Besides, I did not even know what it meant.

Day by day, I heard the phrase, “Little boxes. Little boxes.”

Then, in the middle of the year, a new girl joined our class. Our teacher introduced her as Liza. She looked very small and bony. Her bag was fraying and she looked poor and timid. After recess, I walked back into the classroom early and saw that Liza was weeping uncontrollably. Nervously, I walked up to her and asked her what was going on. She told me that she had just lost her only pencil.

“I know how you feel when you lose something. But you can have mine instead,” I said kindly, touching the pencil to my heart before giving it to her.

Giving the pencil a place in my heart, my pencil would always be inside me, no matter whether it was physically with me. I had never felt this feeling before. Something unknown that had been sitting on my shoulders lifted. Now, I knew what that thing was. It was me wanting to hold on to my things and not letting go. I finally realised that I had been trapped in a little box and had not come out for so long. I am finally free of that prison cell I have been stuck in, free of the limits that were holding me back.

Once I got back home, I immediately walked into my room to ponder. Then I heard some whispers.

Listening carefully, I heard, “Little boxes. Little boxes.”

However, after I tore down the sheet on my calendar and threw it away, the whispers got softer. When I threw away my things and the little boxes after putting them in my heart, all the whispering stopped.

Little boxes. Little boxes. My room is free of little boxes. All those little boxes are now given a place in my heart. In these boxes are the precious memories of those things that I love. Funnily, just by packing away the little boxes in me, I have transcended the limits of my little box that I had created, that I have locked myself in. More importantly, by transcending my limits, opening my box, my monster is free to roam as he pleases. No longer confined in me. No longer forced to feed only on me and he chooses to be free.

First Place

Su Ern Kimi Ong, Singapore
"A Mother's Love"

Zang

"Whee-uh-wee!" a sharp whistle interrupted the languid afternoon.

That was the signal from Meng, my best friend, to meet by the tallest tree near my home to race up it. I bounded over to Momma, and hugged her tightly as I usually did before I went out.

Momma

With a hint of a smile, I shook my head in slight exasperation as I caught my son's fleeting shadow as he scampered out. He so loved to climb trees which always worried me.

Zang was the youngest of my children. I had never expected to care for another child at 48, but as I picked his little body up and looked deep into his cherubic face, I was completely taken. No matter that he appeared several shades lighter than the rest of the family, he was my son. With my other children now having left the nest, and my husband killed during a hunt, it was just Zang and I, and over these six years, Zang had given me reason to carry on with life.

Zang

I had reached the top of the tree in no time but Meng was still clumsily trying to climb up. I was grateful for Meng's company; he didn't ostracise me like the other kids did. Well, we never did fit in with the rest of them. Physically, we stood out like two very sore thumbs. While Meng was born without a right arm, I just looked ... different.

Just then, I felt a slight sway of the tree. Looking down, there was Meng shaking the tall, thin tree vigorously. Unable to reach the top, he apparently wanted me to descend quickly. Before I could steady myself, I lost my grip and the next thing I knew, I was lying on the ground blinking at a sliver of blue sky framed by outstretched tree branches.

Momma

Thud! It was Zang, I knew it - a mother could always identify the cries of her own baby among a thousand. Panic constricted my insides just like the python that had squeezed the life out of my Aunt Zebel. Then, with the intensity of the Malayan tiger, I dropped the jackfruit in my hands and rushed outside.

Zang

“Awww...”

Pain shot through my body like a bullet, as I gripped my head. All I wanted was for Momma to rub her special concoction on my head with her loving fingers and then coo and cuddle me to sleep.

Momma

“Hmph...”

The swelling on Zang’s head was less severe than I had expected. Relieved, I put his arms around my neck and cradled him as we made our way back home, but not before giving Meng a warning glare. If I find out you had anything to do with Zang’s fall....

Once home, I tenderly applied a herbal paste on the bruise. Zang’s saucer-like eyes fluttered for a while, before they finally succumbed to fatigue. As darkness fell, so did my eyelids become heavy and I eventually nodded off with my little boy snoring against my large body.

Mr. Tan

“Do we have the precise location?” I asked Sims, the burly mercenary.

“Yes, sir. Follow the laser beam,” came the confident reply.

Following the red light intently, my eyes settled on a patch that looked like a black hole.

Up to five years ago, I had been working at a scientific research outstation just outside the Borneo rainforest as a scientist. My colleague had decided to raise his infant son in the majesty of the rainforest. However, he awoke one morning only to discover that his baby was missing. Investigations had shown that the baby had possibly been abducted by the apes that inhabited the rainforest and was possibly still alive. The seeds of a hypothesis were planted through this tragedy - a baby raised by apes could possibly be molded into a human robot through cloned cell implantation to do the bidding of its master.

Thus, in secret, I paid mercenaries to

track down the child to clone his cells and began work on the cell cloning technology at the outstation before I was fired when my ethically dubious experiments were discovered.

I will be rich and famous. Those fuddy-duddy scientists will be kissing my feet yet.

Together with the two mercenaries whom I had hired, I trod the jungle floor stealthily towards that black hole.

Zang

My eyes flew open as I felt a big hand wrap over my mouth and a strong grip on my shoulders. With one rude yank, I was torn away from my beloved Momma.

Frantically, I started to thrash about wildly, trying to free myself, trying to make sense of what was going on. The strange creatures that had grabbed me looked like me! Was this a bad dream?

Shaking my head vigorously, the hand over my mouth slipped and I found my voice, “MOMMA!”

I felt myself being carried away faster than ever and a hand went over my mouth again, muffling my piteous cries. Fear mushroomed deeper and deeper in my chest, shriveling my innards, swallowing me whole.

Momma

I awoke with a start, to see my son being snatched by three humans. One of them raised a rifle at me; instinctively, I ducked behind a boulder, managing to dodge a bullet by a hair. I’ve seen those things before, mind you. The thing that killed my dear Ale.

“MOMMA!” Zang’s cry electrified my entire being and snapped me to action.

The one who had my son was running towards the big machine that moved very fast. Springing off my feet, I made for the creature who had my Zang. The sight of him helplessly flailing in that horrible creature’s arms only served to fuel my anger, accelerating my pursuit. How dare he take my son! Haven’t you humans taken enough from me? Mustering every iota of strength, I leapt forward, and my finger-

nails tore ruthlessly down his back, drawing crimson red blood.

Lunging forward, I grabbed a sobbing Zang as he rolled off the human's shoulder, and without a second thought, I disappeared into the forbidding midnight jungle with my son.

Mr. Tan

I didn't know ambition could bring out such physical drive in me as I admired my speed in running towards the jeep, despite having a struggling six-year old slung over my shoulder. Those soldier guys could deal with the mother ape. I just need to make it to ...

I never completed that thought as a shudder rippled through my back and I felt the skin on my back slice apart like salami. The agony crippled me, I staggered forward before slumping to the ground, the boy rolled off my shoulder easily. I drew a sharp intake of breath as I looked up; the dratted mother ape was making off with my prize.

"Stop.." I croaked.

Zang

I knew Momma would always keep me safe. Pulling closer to Momma, I snuggled my head against her warm neck and felt my tension ebbing away as I cocooned myself against her bosom. In the distance, those strange creatures that looked like me were getting smaller and smaller.

Mr. Tan

The mother ape was escaping deep into the jungle, with the boy.

Clenching my fist, my fingernails bore down into my dirt-covered hands. The boy had literally slipped through my fingers. Those useless mercenaries could not even shoot down the mother ape. Six years of searching, gone up in smoke.

I will be back, just you wait.

Second Place

Shilian Sun, Singapore
“True Love Against Time”

Ouch. Someone just threw a cardboard box on me and Codie. It hurt, but not enough to kill me. Sorry, introductions first. My name is Sadie, the former one and only immortal fly. I’m married to my amazing husband, Codie. See? Our names rhyme! That is just so cute. I live in this house, or this garbage bin, that smells really bad, like rotten eggs, dead rats, and the worst things you can think of.

Interesting as my house is, that is not the main thing I want to tell you today. Today, you will be listening to the epic love story of Sadie, the one and only immortal fly (I pride myself in knowing that I’m pretty much invincible).

About 350 years ago, there was this teenage fly named Sadie. Well, being a teenager, I fell in love with this cute and devilishly handsome male fly named Codie. I mean, every teenager falls in love, right? Every time I saw him, my heart fluttered and my stomach “joined in” with a few annoying flips. I tried to will them not to, but hearts can be dumb things. And in a few weeks, we were very much head-over-heels in love. Codie was not immortal so he was pretty much vulnerable to fly swatters or human feet. A human’s feet smell so nice by the way, so gross but that is exactly what I love. Sorry, I get distracted very easily.

So, what happened to Codie was that one fine day, we were sitting on some plastic wrappers in the dustbin, trying to have a decent first date. But as you probably can imagine, that did not work out. We were holding hands with some melted popsicle and muffin crumbs beneath us for a soft ‘bed’. Codie had his lips all puckered up and my heart was beating furiously. *He is going to kiss me!* I thought. And if I could be any emoji at that moment, I guess I would have been the guy with little hearts for eyes.

That is Codie’s favourite emoji! I like the emoji with—sorry I got distracted again. What was I saying? Oh right. So, his lips were a mere millimeter from my lips when someone opened the lid and threw about half a dozen glass shards in the dustbin. I escaped unharmed, but of course my beloved Codie did not! Codie was buried under glass shards and was barely moving. I was petrified and I felt like I was going to faint. About a million needles poked through my heart when he stopped moving for about two seconds.

When I finally came to my senses, I flew out of the dustbin to get help from my uncle Betsy, his wife aunty Portia, and their 2,375 children (yes, I counted). And their names are Agnes, Amelia, Amie,

Arabella, Aria, and—oh no, I'm so sorry. So, what was I saying again? Yes, uncle Betsy, his wife aunty Portia and their 2,375 children. With my quick immortal powers, I flew to their house in the garbage bin five miles away from this garbage bin, and alerted all 2,377 of them, including uncle Betsy and aunty Portia.

However, when we came to the garbage bin my sweetheart Codie was in, we were just in time to see the garbage guy, or whatever they call him, emptying the dustbin into a big truck of some sort, WITH CODIE INSIDE! I crumpled onto the floor in a big sobbing heap and nothing Uncle Betsy, Aunty Portia and their kids said could comfort me. I felt like the crying emoji with tears pouring out.

This is so unfair! Codie did nothing to the horrible garbage guys! Did they really have to do this to my poor darling Codie? So, I flew after the truck alone and told the rest of the flies to go home.

After miles and miles of searching and flying, I finally located the right garbage truck. (Why are there so many garbage trucks? Garbage is good! Why clean it up?). The faint call of Codie could barely be heard, but I was immortal and well, being immortal, I heard Codie's cry for help from afar. And the beautiful sound broke my equally beautiful heart.

The next problem was that I could not get into the garbage bin! That was pretty much the only time I ever hated garbage bins because of their massive lids. It was not impossible, but it certainly would be hard, even with my immortal powers.

It took about another century, or what I thought was a century, which was probably just a few minutes, to open the lid. What I saw made me want to puke. Codie's angelic face was strained, scratched and bleeding, there was a shard poking into his leg, and blood was oozing out from it. I did not know what to do, so I just started crying. "CODIE! Please sweetie, don't go!" Then I remembered how I got my immortal powers.

It all began a long time ago when I was in a similar position to where Codie was. I was hit by a fly swatter. My mother, who was im-

mortal, gave her powers to me so that I would continue living. She died from the exhaustion of passing down her powers. I miss my loving, caring mother so much.

I had two options. Neither of them was good. One was to give my immortality to Codie and die from the strain and fatigue, like my mother did. Two was to leave Codie and let him die. I really did not want to die, but neither did I want Codie to die. I was very selfish back then. Unless... I could transfer half of my immortality. Being half immortal means that you are not vulnerable to dying "accidentally" but still die of old age eventually. I did not want to share my powers with anyone. Plus, I had no idea how to do it.

Codie was running out of time. The glass shard had cut the wound deeper and the wound was almost big enough for the glass shard to sink into Codie's blood. I had no choice. Before I could change my mind, I imagined myself holding my immortality in a shell and cracking the shell into half with my mind. Then, I pictured myself implanting one half of the shell into Codie's mind. The whole process left me drained, but I knew that I was going to make it. I was not so sure about Codie. His wounds were starting to close up, but it was happening really slowly and I was afraid he might die from the blood loss.

Obviously, he did not and today, we are deliriously happy spending time in the smelliest garbage bin and having loads of children. To be exact, 3,099 kids! They are learning how to fly and watching them fail is one of my funniest pastimes with Codie. Codie is a great husband by the way. I do not regret a single bit sharing my precious immortality with someone else. I have changed from a stuck-up, arrogant fly to a sweet and generous one. (Codie still says I'm big-headed. Excuse me?) Wait what was I saying? Right. That's the end of my story.

Second Place

Kaydon Arianne Tan, Singapore
"The Princess and the Pearl"

Once upon a time, in a faraway kingdom, there lived a princess called Alyssa. She wore gorgeous gowns, savoured delectable dishes, and was surrounded by an army of servants.

But she was dreadfully unhappy.

To understand why, we have to embark on a little history relating to the princess. Alyssa is the granddaughter of the princess in the tale, "The Princess and the Pea," whose claim to fame was her ability to become bruised after sleeping on a pile of mattresses, with a pea at the bottom. This led to her being pronounced a true princess and becoming married to the prince.

Henceforth, all princesses and aspiring princesses were lavished with the best skin care, to make their complexion as delicate as a baby's. They were not allowed to go out in the sun; they were not allowed to take part in sports; they were not allowed to engage in any activity that could potentially mar their skin.

This was the reason for Alyssa's unhappiness – she felt suffocated by all these restrictions!

It was not surprising that many of her friends who were raised in this manner became simpering bimbos who only cared about their physical appearance.

Alyssa did not believe that princesses should be so protected and pampered. She wanted to see the world for herself. However, no matter how she argued with her parents, they stood firm.

One day, Alyssa was returning from school when her carriage came to a sudden halt.

"A small, round object has been found on the road, Your Highness. It looks like a pea but it's white, not green," reported her footman as he deposited the object in her outstretched hands.

"How can a pea be white?" she wondered.

To her amazement, the white object started talking. "I am a pearl, not a pea, you ignoramus! How could you even compare me with that lowly creature?"

Alyssa was puzzled. "What is a pearl? And how could you speak of a pea so disrespectfully? It is highly revered throughout the kingdom!"

"That's because your kingdom has been bewitched by the Pea!" retorted the Pearl. "You must be the granddaughter of that princess who slept on the Pea. There is more to that story than meets the eye. Let me tell you what actually happened..."

Fascinated, Alyssa listened intently as the Pearl began its tale.

“On that fateful night when your grandmother first came to the castle, the old queen – your great-grandmother – wanted to find out whether she was a real princess. The queen summoned the Pea and me, and asked us for ideas. I suggested that the queen pose the princess a question: to name the most important attribute that a monarch should have.”

“What is the answer?” Alyssa interjected.

“Why, wisdom, of course!” proclaimed the Pearl. “My family hails from an eminent line of pearls that have served as royal advisors to generations of kings. We are better known as the Pearls of Wisdom,” added the Pearl as it started to glow with pride.

“On the other hand, the Pea came up with the ridiculous idea to let your grandmother lie on a pile of mattresses. The queen was foolish enough to side with the Pea, and we all know what happened afterwards,” sighed the Pearl.

“Sickened by this, I exiled myself from the castle in protest and have been roaming the streets. I’ve had many perilous encounters like today’s when I came within inches of being run over by your carriage! But I’ve also learnt a lot about life, and seen much more than if I’d stayed cloistered in the castle.”

The Pearl recounted one enthralling episode after another. As she listened, it dawned on Alyssa that the Pearl was indeed wise. Instead of bewailing its fate, the Pearl turned its circumstances into an edifying journey.

Soon, Alyssa and the Pearl became great friends. She spent hours listening to the Pearl’s tales, reliving its experiences, and absorbing what the Pearl had learnt about the real world beyond the castle. This made her life more bearable.

One year later, there was a great commotion in the castle. A messenger had arrived from the neighbouring kingdom, announcing that his prince was in search of a wife. All princesses and noble young ladies were invited to a contest to determine who would be most worthy.

This kingdom was the largest and richest of all the lands, and the prince himself renowned for being handsome and accomplished. Like all the other girls, Alyssa soon found herself journeying to this foreign land. Unlike the other girls, she was not dreaming about meeting the prince, but looking forward to new sights and sounds.

On the day of the contest, the air hummed with excitement. Young ladies decked out in their best finery jostled to impress the prince. He stood regally on the stage and called everyone to attention.

“Welcome, ladies, the competition is about to begin. This is how I will choose my bride. I have a stack of mattresses here. You may use them in any way you wish to convince me that you deserve to be the future queen of this kingdom.”

With that, the first lady in the queue stepped forward. She held out a pea and placed it on the ground. Then, she asked the guards to pile twenty mattresses on top of the pea. She proceeded to climb onto the mattresses and lay down. Five minutes later, she showed smugly that a bruise was forming on her back. Holding her head high, she sauntered off the stage.

Another lady came forward and said calmly, “I can do better. Please place one more mattress on that pile.”

With that, she climbed onto the mattresses and lay down. Five minutes later, she showed off her bruise and said, “I have beaten the previous contestant, as there is one more mattress in the pile. This shows that I am even more delicate and even more deserving of being a princess.”

One by one, the ladies in the queue proceeded in similar fashion. Some proudly revealed their bruises, while those who did not display bruises hung their heads in shame and scurried away in tears.

Finally, it was Alyssa’s turn. She was so bored by this spectacle that she had been tempted to escape. Nevertheless, the thought that her parents had pinned their hopes on her to secure an alliance with this powerful kingdom stayed her.

When she stepped gracefully onto the stage, the prince, who was immensely bored by this time, expected her to make the same request as the other contestants. Instead, eyeing the massive pile of mattresses, she asked him, “Can I do something different with those mattresses?”

“Certainly. Please proceed,” replied the prince, intrigued.

Alyssa said, “When I was travelling here, I passed through a village that was recently ravaged by a wild fire. The villagers had lost their belongings and were sleeping on the bare ground. If we could deliver these mattresses to the village, it would be a great comfort to them.”

Looking at her with admiration, the prince declared, “Such wisdom in one so young! You have showed us the True Worth of a real princess. I shall be honoured if you’re willing to be my wife.”

With a smile, she took his hand and nodded her head demurely. Little did he know that in her other hand, she clutched reverently to her Pearl of Wisdom.

Together, they ruled wisely and lived happily ever after.

Third Place

Avah Dodson, Lafayette, CA
“The Bomb Squad”

Alexa Kroshatt’s mind whirled with escape plans: injury, illness, blackmail. Sweat clung to Alexa’s forehead like a sticky Band-Aid. She scrunched herself into a tight ball—like if she made herself smaller, she might be invisible.

The soft, lavender comforter that was babyish but Alexa’s only protection from evil was thrown off.

“Alexa,” a firm voice sounded next to her. “Get. Up. Now.”

Gleeful giggling came from another voice.

“Five more minutes...” Alexa grumbled, turning over.

She suddenly had forgotten all of her ideas for how to get out of school.

“Now, Alexa,” her mom insisted. “You know today is the first day of MS Junior High, and no daughter of mine is going to be late on the first day.”

Alexa had nimbly evaded her mother’s grasp at first, but when her mom got to the “daughter of mine” bit, there was no refusing. Amy, her seven-year-old little sister, scampered off and out of her room down the hall, probably going to annoy Ellen or Matthias.

Alexa pulled on her hand-picked outfit: long shirt and mini-skirt, knee-high socks, and her Cat ‘n Jack slippers. She reluctantly started her daily routine, which began by waiting in line for the bathroom. Ellen was in there, brushing and styling her hair, washing her face, putting on lipstick, putting in earrings, dabbing her face with weird lotion, and checking herself in the mirror for the bajillionth time. Ellen finally walked out, and Alexa went in, but before she could close the door, Ellen dashed back in because she had forgotten to trim her eyebrows. By the time Alexa was done, she was late for breakfast. *Maybe that’s not a bad thing*, she thought. *Maybe I’ll end up being too late to go to school.*

Alexa trudged down the stairs to Matthias eating sloppily, Ellen gabbing on the phone, and her mother handling Amy.

Her mom shoved a blueberry muffin and her backpack into her hands.

“Bye, Alexa! Don’t miss the bus!” she said, pushing Alexa out the door, while Matthias gave a skeptical grunt. “Have a good day and make some new friends!”

Friends. The word rang in Alexa’s mind as she hurried out the door. That was what she was most nervous about. There was the good kind of friend, like Stella and Maddie from back in Wisconsin.

And then there was the bad kind, the stuck-up vain kind who dumped you just as soon as you started to trust them. Alexa stepped onto the bus and into the bustle of paper airplanes, loud voices, and stomping feet. She chose an empty seat and crouched down, almost hiding herself from view, and envisioning her lavender comforter as an invisible shield.

"Um, is this seat taken?"

Alexa looked up. A girl with brown hair pulled in a ponytail was staring at her, backpack slung over one shoulder. She was dressed in a rose-colored cardigan, blue jeans, and a tight purple shirt.

"Sure," Alexa answered, scooching over.

The girl plopped down onto the empty seat. They didn't talk to each other the whole ride.

As they started putting on their backpacks and stepping off the bus, the girl suddenly asked, "Are you new here?"

Alexa nodded, "How'd you know?"

"You're using both shoulders to carry your backpack. Everyone else here does it with one."

Her blue eyes glinted.

"But two's cool. I'm Holly Andrews."

She stuck out her hand. They shook.

* * * * *

Turned out that Alexa and Holly had homeroom and Spanish together. Holly sat first and motioned for Alexa to sit next to her.

"You're going to *love* Mr. Gavin," Holly whispered. "Sometimes he's strict, but he's still really funny."

"Cool," Alexa said, not really listening.

She was looking around at all of her classmates, hearing snippets of their conversations about summers and movies. She sensed their excitement about a new year.

"Holly!" someone called.

Holly turned and brightened when she saw a girl with dark hair and chocolate eyes shimmy over.

"Hey, Catrina!" Holly called back.

The girl beat a beefy boy to the seat next to Holly's and triumphantly thumped down her backpack.

"Who's this?" she asked, looking at Alexa.

"Alexa Kroshatt," Holly answered, looking pleased with herself. "She's new."

"Is she one of us?" Catrina asked hesitantly.

One of us? thought Alexa.

"I don't know yet," Holly answered, and then, dropping her voice, continued, "but once she meets the other Bombs, we'll know for sure."

"Bombs?" Alexa asked. "Why do you have bombs?"

"For nuclear explosions, of course," Holly and Catrina answered simultaneously.

Then Holly giggled, and Alexa realized they were joking.

Catrina opened her mouth to answer, but an odd-looking man clapped his hands and called for attention.

"That's Mr. Gavin," Catrina whispered to Alexa. "He was alive when the dinosaurs roamed the earth."

And for the first time that day, Alexa smiled.

* * * * *

At lunch, Alexa sat down next to Holly. "Trade you cookies for pizza," she offered.

"Sure."

As Holly swiped the cookies, Catrina and another girl sat down across from them. The new girl had bushy red hair, freckles, and a pink dress.

"Alexa, this is Penelope Weinstein," Catrina said.

The girl waved.

"She's our Treasurer," Holly added. "And I'm Vice President. Catrina's Secretary."

"Secretary of what?" Alexa asked. "And who's the President?"

At that very moment, a fifth girl appeared with an air of authority about her. Sheets of straight black hair fell to her hips. She wore a tight black shirt and black leggings over her pale skin. Her pale blue eyes were keen and focused.

"And that's our President, Violet," Holly finished.

The girl plopped down on the bench next to Penelope.

"New recruit?" Violet asked, eyeing Alexa curiously.

"Hopefully," Penelope replied.

"Does she know anything?"

"Not yet."

"Then we'd best fill her in."

They abandoned their half-eaten lunches (though Holly grabbed the cookies) and followed Violet to a quiet nook.

Penelope burst out, "Just look at her, Vi! She's totally one of us."

"One of *what*?" Alexa asked.

Holly and Violet exchanged glances, and Violet nodded.

"One of our club," Holly said, the words rushing out. "We're the Bomb Squad. The 'Be-ware Of Mischievous Boys' Squad. We support girls at school when they are being teased by boys."

"We're also friends who just like to hang out," Penelope interrupted, as Holly stopped for air.

"Yep," Violet piped up. "We have meetings every Wednesday, and we hold fundraisers and the profits go to the club, which we use every month for a Bomb Squad pizza party."

Everyone stared at Alexa expectantly.

She took a deep breath, taking it all in, and asked, "So, you're inviting me to join your club?"

Catrina nodded.

"How about we give you time to decide? Tell us after school lets out today," Violet suggested. The others agreed.

Just then, the bell rang. The girls scattered, and Alexa headed to English.

* * * * *

Alexa's last period of the day was art. She grabbed a pencil and paper as soon as the art teacher started talking. Art was one class where she didn't usually have to pay attention. She could just let her mind wander.

Alexa thought about what it would be like to join the club. She liked the idea of teasing Matthias about it. And the girls seemed really nice. But what if the girls weren't really as friendly as they seemed today? Maybe she'd be better off alone. It would be worse to join and then get kicked out of the club than not to join at all. Doubts swarmed Alexa's mind. She looked down at her art project to see that it was all scribble. She pushed the doubts away and grabbed a Sharpie to fix things.

Do what you think is right.

Alexa froze, her mother's voice echoing in her ears. She could clearly remember the time her mom said that to her years ago while she was reading Alexa a picture book.

Do what you think is right. Don't let things get in the way.

She smiled.

"Alexa?" Ms. Bixby, the art teacher, stood over her, frowning down at her mess of a drawing. "Perhaps you need to work somewhere quieter where you can focus?"

* * * * *

Holly, Violet, Penelope, and Catrina met Alexa in the throng of kids outside the school's main entrance. Alexa was ready for them.

"Well?" Violet asked, and her eyes betrayed a gleam of hope. Holly, Penelope, and Catrina leaned forward excitedly. "What will it be?"

* * * * *

"Honey, is that you?" her mom asked as Alexa shut the front door and slumped her backpack on the chair.

Alexa's grin was so big she felt her teeth might pop out. Alexa Kroshatt was new to this town. She had faced the impossible, but survived. And she had achieved something she never thought she'd do.

"Mom?" Alexa called. "I joined a club."

Third Place

Richelle Yu Fang Ng, Singapore
“A Surprise Date”

“AHH! There is the cutest man in our workplace, Jake!” I fangirled out loud to my fellow colleagues.

I am Masie and I practically love Jake as much as I love K-pop. Jake behaves the same way as my K-pop idol from BTS (the Bangtan Boys), Jungkook, as he is perfect in everything that he does. Handsome, polite, and charming, who could resist a man like him? I have always wanted a date with Jake, but I constantly question myself as to why Jake has never noticed me before. Am I too fat? Am I too short? This is so nerve-wracking for me!

Little did I know that Jake had actually had a surprise for me. One day, when I reached home, I saw a small parcel around the size of a book. I picked it up and looked around to see if the sender of the package was still around. It said:

“To Masie and Masie only; do not open in front of people.
From: XXX”

I scratched my head and started walking toward the entrance to my family home. No one was inside. I quickly scampered through the front door and ran into my room so quickly I almost fell. I opened the parcel, fingers shaking with excitement, and nearly had a heart attack after seeing what was inside.

Inside the parcel was a note and a 24 K pure gold ring and necklace. Both were studded with gleaming diamonds that shone as if they were made of starlight. In the center of the ring was a huge, glistening, blue sapphire. A note came along with it which read:

“Dear Masie, I have admired you for a long time and I think it is time for me to confess my love to you. Tomorrow, would you like to go on a date with me? Please reply via email.

My email is: Jakethecool@cool.com

Love,
Jake”

I screamed with glee and immediately started writing an e-mail response to Jake. Minutes later, I received a reply.

At lunch, I told my family about this and they encouraged me to go on the date. My older sister, who was already married and was visiting the family home with her husband, told me teasingly that Jake might propose to me on the date.

“SHUT UP!” I yelled, my face as red as a tomato.

Embarrassed, I stormed to my room and I locked the door. I flopped onto my bed and buried my head in a mound of pillows.

I then thought about whether or not I would be proposed to during the date. I supposed that the answer would lie in the hands of fate. Perhaps Jake and I were destined to be lovers?

I decided to just go to the date the next day calmly with no hopes of Jake wanting to propose to me. Then, it struck me.

Oh, yes! I need to buy a suitable outfit for the date!

Later that day, I went shopping with my best friends who were experts at dating and marriage. I wanted the perfect dress for the date and found a dark blue dress glittering with sparkles. The dress was within my budget of \$1,000, and I still had \$100 worth of change left!

The next day, a gleaming black Rolls-Royce pulled up at my two-storey garage in front of my twenty-storey house. A butler inside Jake's car got out, bowed, and led me into the car. The car was very spacious and clean. I savoured the fact that beside me was Jake. His skin was gorgeous as usual, his cologne smelled heavenly and his hair was ruffled, giving him a roguishly handsome look. He had on a black cotton suit with a blue-colored tie, a pair of black shiny leather shoes plus a pure gold Rolex watch studded with diamonds. He looked like a prince! I snapped myself out of my dreamy reverie and focused on the polished ebony woodwork as well as the beautifully cushioned white leather seats in the car.

I finally decided to start a conversation with Jake.

"So... what will we be eating?" I tried, making eye contact with him.

"We are eating at a French fine dining restaurant," he answered, smiling, which revealed to me his two dimples.

We talked until I asked a question that made him blush awkwardly. "Have you ever proposed to someone?" I asked, out of curiosity.

He immediately turned red and stopped talking. I felt weird because I never expected this sort of reaction from him. He was usually bold and confident, and never turned red

or shy. After that weirdly awkward moment, the atmosphere around us chilled a little and we talked politely until we got to the French restaurant.

When we reached the restaurant, the butler helped Jake and me out of the car. The chauffeur then handed the car over to the valet, who goggled and gaped at the high-end luxury car.

"Hurry and bring the car to the carpark, valet," Jake said to the valet crisply.

"I-I..." the valet stuttered before getting into the Rolls-Royce carefully.

Upon entering the fine, expensive restaurant, I noticed a little velvet box falling out of Jake's exquisite tuxedo pant pocket.

"Oops!" he squeaked, hastily bending to retrieve the box.

I looked at him suspiciously. Was that a box for a ring made by that famous jeweler, Amore Jewels? I decide to brush that thought aside and a waiter led us to our seat right near the panoramic glass windows.

I looked at Jake, Jake looked at me and we both blushed—the awkwardness of earlier seemingly forgotten. Jake told me to order whatever I wanted to eat, for this was his family's restaurant and thus he had no limit to how much he could spend.

Halfway through the meal, Jake suddenly bent down on one knee and looked straight into my eyes. My heart pounded. Was he... PROPOSING to me?

As if reading my thoughts, Jake took out that velvet box from earlier and exclaimed, "Masie, would you marry me?"

Blood roared in my ears.

Pleasantly shocked, I stuttered out a "Yes!"

Soon after, Jake dropped me off at my house and we planned to be married within a month.

After getting married, we went home holding hands and the next morning, I was pregnant.

Now, I live happily with Jake and have two kids, John and Mary. That is my story.

Ages 11-12

First Place

Shi Ern Joy Ong
Age 11
Singapore
"A Dog's Wish"

Yuhuan Yi
Age 11
Singapore
"The Lost Prince"

Second Place

Ashmi Chatterjee
Age 12
Singapore
"The Odd Rodent Out"

Eashaa Pillai
Age 11
Singapore
"24 Hours Left"

Third Place

Jemma Miin Yee Lee
Age 12
Singapore
"Precious Honesty"

Claudia Lim Zhi Xi
Age 12
Singapore
"The Life Models"

First Place

Shi Ern Joy Ong, Singapore
“A Dog’s Wish”

Since the day I set foot in the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), I had only one unwavering wish - to be adopted. I yearned to have my very own warm home, to be loved unconditionally. My previous owner had been attentive to all my needs when I was a puppy, especially since he enjoyed the attention he received from strangers when we went out for walks.

That all changed, as my looks began to fade with age and my left eye started to cloud over due to the degeneration of tissue in my eyeball. There were times when he forgot to feed me, to take me for walks, to tickle me behind my ears. The death knell finally sounded when he unexpectedly took me out to a park. I had been over the moon, my bottled-up zest finally had an outlet. My mad excitement came to be a cruel halt when I realised that he was gone forever. Time lost meaning, I didn’t know how long I was out on the streets for, surviving by the skin of my teeth. By the time I was picked up by the SPCA, I was a flea-infested bag of bones.

Gradually, I was nursed from the edge of death back to health at the SPCA. As much as I was grateful for my second lease on life, the SPCA was nothing to shout about. I didn’t have many friends as my yard mates were an ever-revolving door of breeds and characters. They came and went as fast or slow as the line of human adopters went. The only constant in my life was Katie, who worked at the SPCA as an animal keeper. She would give me extra treats when she saw that I was moping around the yard in a mix of disappointment and jealousy after another yard mate was successfully adopted. When she had a moment from work, she would fetch me and we would go on a walk around the compound which always seemed to end too soon.

On a balmy June afternoon, the bell that hung over the gate to my yard jangled, signaling that a visitor was entering the yard in search of a pet companion. As usual, I leapt up and hung my tongue out, and started wagging my chocolate-brown tail as enthusiastically as I could, trying to be the cutest version of myself. It was a routine that I had perfected over the last few years at the SPCA.

This time, a family of three had come to make their selection, but my gut told me that this time was different from the rest of the visits by potential adopters - the little girl had made eye contact with me and was approaching! I was usually not a first-choice selection given my age and the condition of my eye. Widening my eyes as best I could, I hopped on my back paws, doing my best imitation of Chihuahuas.

“Awwww, you’re funny!” the little girl giggled as she stroked my body gently with her soft hands.

Her laughter only served to fan the fire in my heart.

Then, she uttered the magic words, “Mum, can I adopt this dog?”

I felt as though my heart would burst out of my body. Oh, the very moment that I had been waiting for had finally arrived! Through my seemingly incoherent barks, I promised that I would be obedient, I would eat when told, I would do my business where it should be done, I would keep my paws off the furniture ...

“No, I’m sorry, Marie. One of the dog’s eyes is blind. Your father and I would prefer to adopt a healthy dog.”

My antics slowed as I tried to register her words in my confused brain. That could not be! Blind? I could see perfectly well with my right eye, mind you Madam! I heard Marie protesting her mother’s decision but she was soon silenced by a sharp glare from her mother. Before long, Marie was steered towards a young, newly-arrived Pomeranian.

My tail drooped as I slowly padded around the yard and finally slumped in a corner, feeling the essence of life ebbing away. I had come so close, only to have my dream shut out by that resolute “No” from the lips of Marie’s mother. I shut my eyes and tried to block out all memories of my encounter with Marie as the tears escaped the corners of my eyes. The undulating waves of hope and despair were getting too much for me to bear. All I wanted was a home to call my own. Was that too much to ask of life?

Despondency simmered in my bowels for the next few months. My depression was exacerbated when I became the oldest resident at the SPCA after Oldie, the limping Golden Retriever, passed on, and that only meant one sure fate - that I would live out the rest of my life at the SPCA like a lonely old geezer. That unbearable reality pushed me further and further back into my shell.

The yard was alive with animated conversation among its canine residents as usual after lunch one fine December day, but I was too immobilised by self-pity to participate in the chatter.

Katie entered the yard and picked me up, cradling me affectionately in her arms, “Hey, Jax!”

Katie’s breath warmed my ear. I hadn’t been my usual self around her ever since I was rejected by Marie, and she had been magnanimously understanding about it.

“Jax, want to hear something?”

Katie was excited about something but I was in no mood to listen; all I wanted was to wallow in my sea of misery. However, that was not to be as Katie gently lifted my chin up and tenderly rubbed my nose against hers.

“Guess what, you’re going to be my flat-mate!” Katie squealed as she then buried her face in my stomach.

My ears perked up, and my heart started to palpitate, but in that instant, the image of Marie flashed through my mind.

“Oh, please do not let this be a joke, Katie, there is only so much rejection that a Dachshund can take,” I pleaded through soft whines as I tried to temper my expectations and keep my sanity in check.

“I’ve just managed to buy my own little flat and so I can finally adopt you. You’ve always been the one for me!” declared Katie, grinning from ear to ear like a Cheshire cat, “We are going home together tonight!”

Did I... did I hear right? To be adopted, and by my best friend to boot, what more could a Dachshund ask for? All at once, I felt my melancholia melt away. Imploding with unbri-dled happiness, I licked Katie’s laughing face furiously, then leapt down and did a silly jig around her.

Katie had never once divulged her plans, I guess she didn’t want my heart broken if her little flat didn’t come through. Exuberance coursed through my veins like the gushing waters of a storm drain that I had once fallen into. Katie, I will defend you with all my life till kingdom come!

I suppose life has its own way of spring-ing surprises, fulfilling wishes in its own way, in its own time. To all my canine buddies out there, stay strong. In every gutter, there will always be a sprig of hope that springs eternal.

First Place

Yuhuan Yi, Singapore
"The Lost Prince"

Michelle was my best friend living in the neighbourhood. We played together, adventured together, read together...and one day, we found Prince together.

It was a Saturday morning. We went exploring in the park nearby, pretending we were adventurers. As we laughed and walked, something caught my eye. It was a purple stone, the size of a pear, shimmering in the morning sun.

I pointed it out to Michelle, whose eyes lit up.

"Ooh... shiny!" She gasped dramatically, picking it up.

We took a closer look at it.

"Is that a human face?" I asked Michelle uncertainly, raising my eyebrow at her.

"Doesn't it look like the prince picture on the cover page of that book? The book we both love and browse the most?" she agreed.

Then, within three minutes, we had found the patterns of a temple and a star fish from other surfaces of the stone. By the fourth minute we had reached consensus to name it Prince.

We spent hours tracing varieties of patterns like wild animals, plants and even planets on Prince, making up stories about them. Prince seemed to have the magic to draw infinite possibilities out of our minds.

Out of our obsession with Prince and fear of losing him, we attempted to keep him home and away from the eyes of our mothers, who were crazy about maintaining hygiene in our houses. I was the first one caught, then Michelle. We had to find a shelter for Prince outside our houses, or he would be "recycled," according to my mother.

"How does that saying go? 'Where does a wise man hide a leaf?'" Michelle wondered.

"In the forest," I replied.

So, we went to the same park where Prince was uncovered.

After some time of searching high and low, Michelle called out to me, "Jane! Look, I spotted a perfect hiding place!"

I jogged up to her and examined that place. Under a big, shady tree, near its roots, a hidden hole slightly larger than an apple was revealed to me by a proud Michelle.

"Nice place," I commented, taking the stone out of my bag.

We squeezed the stone into the hole, then covered it up with dirt and made it look as natural as possible. That being accomplished, we smiled and high-fived.

Every day after that we would find some time, together or apart, to go and check on Prince, and play by the tree.

Time passed and before we knew it, three months had flown by. On an ordinary morning, Michelle and I met up by Prince's home. We spent some happy time making small talk, before Michelle's face grew serious.

"What's the matter?" I queried my normally cheerful and carefree friend. "Why so gloomy?"

"Well... I-I'm moving."

"What?!" I exclaimed. "Where? When? Why?"

I prayed secretly that it would be somewhere rather near.

"To- To another country..." Michelle wiped some tears from her eyes. "I would've told you sooner but I was only told last night before I went to bed... We're leaving in a week. Something to do with my father's job."

"Oh," I muttered, my hope gone. "I can't believe it though!" I added in surprise. "Promise me you'll stay in touch with me. You know my home number."

"I promise I'll call you the moment I arrive at our new house," Michelle told me firmly.

One week later, Michelle's family moved away.

I was moody for a few days, immersing myself so deeply in the sorrow of parting from my best friend that I totally forgot Prince. Then the other day I came across the book with the Prince image on the cover page and suddenly remembered him.

Running back to the hiding-place, I pushed my hand inside.

Nothing was there.

I pushed my hand deeper in, trying to reach Prince.

Still nothing.

A surge of panic flowed through me. He was gone.

I couldn't imagine that it was retrieved by some stranger. This place was so hidden. I pondered by the tree.

The image of Michelle's face gazing at Prince flashed in my mind. The thought struck me like lightning. It was Michelle! She loved

Prince so much that she took him away with her!

I felt so hurt that Michelle didn't even ask for my opinion. We were best friends! I would have definitely agreed without any hesitation to let Prince go with her. If only she had asked! And she didn't even mention it when she called from her new home!

I was showered in the feeling of betrayal and refused to talk to Michelle over the phone a week later when she called again. I even dumped her contact number into the dustbin. Michelle called a few times later on but in vain. Then she stopped calling. My whole world became plain and lonely without Michelle and Prince, for a whole year.

The next year, I was in sixth grade and walking home from school one day. When I arrived at my house, a tall girl standing near the front porch caught my eye. Out of curiosity, I walked towards her, and...

"Michelle!?" I cried happily in surprise, for I had moved on from the Prince "accident" over time.

"Jane!" She called ecstatically.

We literally ran into each other and hugged for eternity.

"I can't believe it!" I said, finally breaking apart from the hug. "How are you? Why are you back? We've got so much to catch up on!"

I invited her into my house. We sat on the sofa and talked animatedly about everything that happened in our lives after our separation.

Michelle had come back with her mother to settle some business locally and we just had one afternoon to hang out together before she had to depart again.

After a while, Michelle stood up, "I miss Prince so much! Come, let's go and visit him!"

I responded in shock, "Wait, I realised that Prince was gone a few days after you left. I thought you took him without telling me and I was angry at you for a whole year!"

"What?" Michelle blurted out incredulously. "So that's why you didn't answer my calls! You really should have picked up the phone and everything would have been explained in a minute."

So, Michelle and I headed to the tree on a journey to uncover Prince again.

We dug up the hole. Nothing.

We dug deeper and deeper. Still nothing.

Shaking my head, I suggested, "Some jerk must have taken him."

"No!" Michelle refused to give up easily.

So, we kept digging. Until, at last, my hand felt empty air instead of dirt...

"Michelle!" I practically screamed in surprise and joy. "I know where he is now!"

I raced back home and took a flashlight. With the aid of the flashlight, a stone covered by dirt resting in a low-lying spot further inside the hole greeted us in silence. He must have dropped into that spot somehow when we pushed him inside last time.

"Prince!" Michelle, delighted, took him out of the dirt. "Aw, baby, are you okay? Buried down in all that dirt!"

The moment we found lost Prince, it seemed like a small piece of me that was missing was finally back. Along with that, our friendship grew back. We kept in touch ever since, talking over the phone from time to time and sharing our little secrets, whether it was about Prince or not.

Second Place

Ashmi Chatterjee, Singapore
“The Odd Rodent Out”

I am like an awkward intellectual in a room full of bumbling idiots. At least, as intellectual as you can be when you are covered in fur, have four paws and look like a hamster. Though, I would be very offended if you were to call me a hamster. Please keep in mind that we are not hamsters, merely a species of rodent.

I have always been different in quite a few ways. When the others crowd around the popular grass patches and inevitably have to struggle and fight for food, I nimbly scurry away on my short, once again, hamster-like legs and find a secluded grass patch to eat from. Grass is grass, isn't it? Well, I always think practically. The others may choose to treat time as though it is locked in an air-tight box, but not me. I am realistic. To me, time is a leaking tap, constantly dripping without you even knowing it. While the others act like belligerent fools and slack off and run around in autumn, I meticulously gather grass and feathers to strengthen my nest in the underground burrows that we share. When winter comes, I stay comfortably warm while the other lemmings shiver and give me envious looks.

Now, I don't necessarily *enjoy* being unlike the other lemmings. I don't do exactly what the other lemmings do. I don't follow them, and that makes them treat me like a misfit. Some of the lemmings resent me for being different and ostracise me, so I do my best to fit in. But I will always be a few steps behind the others, or a few seconds late to understand what is going on.

That's why when one of my peers, a friendlier one of the unfriendly faces, squeals in my ear one day, “We're gonna dive into the ocean in a few days!” I am badly startled.

In fact, I am so badly startled, that I nearly fall off the Norwegian cliff we are eating grass from, into the valley it is overlooking. I mean, of course, we lemmings can swim, but I cannot make head or tail of the fact that apparently, we are going to deliberately throw ourselves into a massive body of saline water, simply to drown.

When I voice this concern, my companion replies while chewing a mouthful of grass, “It's getting kind of crowded in here, don't you think? Some smart guy said that we could swim across the ocean and migrate somewhere else, and now everyone's totally on board with it! Do you want to run to the sea with my group?”

I want to point out that I am not “totally on board with it” and that I would be rather surprised if we don't shatter all our bones on impact with the water. However, one part of his statement catches

me off guard. He wants me to run with his group? That means that I am finally being accepted! Anyway, even if there may be some things fundamentally wrong with his idea, if one lemming does something, everyone else does it too. Lemmings have always followed each other, no matter what the action being done is. Even better, he wants me to run with him and his group! I clamp my jaws shut on my unease and revel in the joy of finally being *friends*, or at least acquaintances, with someone. Maybe I can just follow the crowd on this one? Yet as I scurry towards the other lemmings, I still have a nagging doubt in the back of my mind.

“Are you sure it will be safe?” I ask the lemming beside me for the hundred and first time.

We are standing atop a cliff overlooking the sea. Behind me is the lush greenery of Norway’s forests and plains and in front of me is the infinite expanse of the blue ocean. However, the group of lemmings, including me, leaning over the cliff with what I realised later was an extraordinarily daft desire to jump off, doesn’t add any beauty to the scene. Yet, I don’t want to be the odd rodent out, so even though I have reservations, I will still jump. How bad can it be?

The first lemming jumps off. I watch with a mix of curiosity, fear and apprehension as he hurtles down the cliff and falls into the water with a dull *thunk*. He does not resurface. Yet even this blatant proof that they will not survive the fall does nothing to deter the other lemmings. It seems to incentivise them even more. One after the other, the lemmings jump off like flowers spiralling and falling off branches, with a maniacally intent look on their faces known only to those of our kind. I can even see their tiny bodies flailing before they drown. I, being the practical-minded lemming I am, suddenly want no part of this.

“What, are you afraid? Everyone else is doing it! It must be awesome! Why don’t you ever follow anyone else? Lemmings are meant to follow but you lead yourself and do whatever you want. It’s unnatural. You’re weird, you know?” a lemming jeers at me from behind.

I am suddenly struck with a feeling that tells me that what these lemmings are doing is wrong. Why am I following them?

“I am not weird; I am simply not as delusional as the rest of you! You may choose to hurl yourself off a cliff just because after seeing others do so, you feel compelled to, but I will not throw away my life just to be ‘one of the others!’”

There is pin-drop silence among the lemmings still left on the cliff.

If I am viewed as different, so be it. If this one choice that makes me different in the eyes of the other lemmings saves my life and allows me to do something worthwhile with the time I have left, then I will receive this sudden change of heart with open arms-- or should I say paws. Seeing what has happened to the lemmings who blindly followed the others, has made me see the truth.

“If you want to throw away your life just to follow some other dumb lemmings who have done nothing whatsoever to help you, then you are absolutely welcome to. However, if someone isn’t offering you something that is good for you, take my advice and ignore them! You should do what you think is right, not what someone else has convinced you to do. Make your own decisions.”

Following this speech, I abruptly turn and start scampering home, feeling a swelling sense of pride when I hear the sound of the lemmings scurrying along behind me. A change of heart has saved me and those lemmings who might have blindly jumped off otherwise. It has made me see reason. Finally, I know that I can make my own choices and decisions. I am entitled to my own views, no matter how different.

Choices are important. Whether you choose the hard one or the easy one is up to you, but whatever you do, do what you think is right. I may be a dumb lemming compared to the big humans who roam the lands, but perhaps we can all do with a lesson in morals.

I close my eyes, curl up in my nest and go to sleep. Maybe being different isn’t so bad after all.

Second Place

Eashaa Pillai, Singapore
"24 Hours Left"

The waiting area of the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) seemed so peaceful. There was no hurried activity. No wailing visitors. Just a tranquil calm. Such a vast difference from all the shows I had watched on television where there were always doctors and nurses running around seemingly saving lives even along the hospital corridors. There were no doctors or nurses here in the waiting room. Just sombre faces of people who had come to visit their loved ones.

I was sitting there waiting for my turn to go in. It seemed that the hospital controlled the number of people entering the ICU much like people entering a nightclub. Here the "bouncer" at the door was a middle-aged pot-bellied man with thinning hair who wore a blue uniform with a badge that said "Security."

"Remember, when you go in, don't touch anything," my mother whispered as she put a dollop of hand sanitiser onto my palms. "Everything in the hospital is crawling with germs; and you don't want to set off the alarms on the monitors by accidentally touching them," she continued.

After about 20 minutes, my mother and I walked in. My cousin, Navya, was lying in Room 33, all the way at the end of the long corridor in the ICU.

It was only 24 hours earlier that my parents had told me, after I had returned home from Netball practice.

"Your cousin Navya is in hospital. She was in an accident and she is in a serious condition," my mother stated matter-of-factly. "I know the two of you haven't really been close but we should go and see her."

My mother was right – we were not that close - but then again, my whole extended family was not that close. We had not even seen or spoken to each other in five years. My extended family fell apart after my grandmother died and there was apparently some argument about her will and estate. I was really young then and although there was a lot of arguing between my father and his siblings after my grandmother died, I did not know at that time what it was about.

But I knew Navya from the time we had spent together in our grandmother's house every Friday evening when my extended family would come to visit my grandmother. Navya was nine years older than I. She was vivacious even as a teenager and was always full of encouragement. She would tell my cousins and me that we must always be willing to offer our help to others. My mother told me of

the time Navya brought home a stray kitten because she thought it looked lonely. Navya herself would tell us how she was always lending kids in her school lunch money or offering to help with their schoolwork. She seemed like someone who was popular in school and her large frizzy hair just seemed to complement her lively personality. In short, she was everything that I was not and I resented how my parents would point it out to me.

Well that was five years ago. I had hardly seen her since my grandmother died. And now, I barely recognised the person I saw from across the sliding glass doors. Her head was bandaged and her face was swollen. The tube coming out of her mouth was but one of many that seemed to be hooked up to electronic monitors and pumps by her bedside. There were so many numbers and figures on display on the different monitors. The barrage of numbers and beeps from the different machines could not have contrasted more sharply with the person who was just lying there under the white blankets – all motionless and seemingly at peace.

I glanced at my mother standing next to me. She did not cry but I saw a tear roll down her cheek. I knew that this was not how my mum remembered Navya either. We must have stood there for about ten minutes just looking into the room. We did not say a word to each other but as we walked out, I saw the other rooms with patients in them. All lying peacefully in their beds. The world just outside in the corridors of the ICU was a hive of incessant activity with the constant movement of nurses, the clatter of keyboards and the ceaseless ringing of telephones. There was no drama - just the hum of efficient, important work.

Outside the ICU, Navya's parents—my aunt and uncle—were standing in the corner of the waiting room with my other aunts and uncles. This was where they had been staying since the day before, since Navya was admitted. This corner of the waiting room was unofficially my family's corner. The two of them looked like they had not slept in days. My aunt had probably been crying a lot; her hoarse, congested voice gave it away.

My aunt said that the doctors said the injury to Navya's brain was just too great. The brain was too swollen and only the machines and medications were keeping her alive. It seemed so unreal that she was only 19 and facing death. My aunt also said that the doctors had talked to her about organ donation.

My aunt took this as the surest sign that Navya was going to die. I learnt that according to Singapore's Human Organ Transplantation Act, the doctors could donate Navya's organs on her death. They would only be unable to do this if my aunt and uncle did not give their consent.

My aunt was understandably not too happy about it but my Uncle was more pragmatic.

"It was what she would have wanted to do," he said.

And I guess he was right. Even in her last act, Navya would be helping total strangers.

I don't know what my Aunt and Uncle decided. My parents and I drove home that night without saying a word. When my father's hand phone rang the next morning, as I was on my way to school, I knew what my father had heard on the line. He didn't have to tell me.

My cousin was like a light that shone so bright. My father told me that Navya's parents had agreed to go ahead with the organ donation. It seemed apt for the girl who always wanted to help. Navya's final curtain call in life would probably have meant a new act in the lives of others on the "Stage of Life."

I hardly knew her. Now that she was gone, I wished that I had known her better. Everyone she knew liked her. I think, if I had looked past the comparisons and jealousy, I might just have liked her too.

Oscar Wilde said: "Everyone may not be good but there's always something good in everyone. Never judge anyone shortly because every saint has a past and every sinner has a future".

Third Place

Jemma Miin Yee Lee, Singapore
“Precious Honesty”

It was another typical day at work for Lucy. Never in her dreams would she imagine that, that day, her tiny act of honesty would cause someone to have a change of heart.

Lucy arranged a pretty bouquet of fresh flowers on the nightstand. She fluffed up the remaining pillows on the majestic bed and smoothed out the creases in the silky sheets. Stepping lightly across the plush carpet, Lucy took a moment to survey the spacious and luxurious hotel suite that she had just finished cleaning.

Satisfied, Lucy smiled. She took great pride in her work. To Lucy, this was more than just a job that provided her with the income that she needed to support her three young children. Lucy had dreams—she aspired to become a hotel manager someday, and this was her way of working towards fulfilling that dream.

Lucy glanced at her watch. It was 10 minutes to the end of her shift. She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ears and rolled her narrow shoulders around a little to relieve her fatigue. Breathing in the clean, lavender-scented air, Lucy quietly stepped out and closed the door of the suite behind her with a soft click. Efficiently, she stacked the vacuum cleaner and bottles neatly back into her service cart. Unobtrusively, Lucy pushed the cart down the corridor.

In another suite down the hallway, a fair woman with large, almond eyes was smiling at her own reflection in the mirror. Catherine fussed her coal-black hair into a loose chignon at the base of her neck, while admiring the diamonds on her well-manicured fingers. The vain socialite could not wait to show her new rings off to her friends.

Then, she remembered her husband’s advice—not to attract unwanted attention with her flashy jewellery when travelling. She pouted slightly. Reluctantly, Catherine removed the rings from her slender fingers and placed them carefully into the velvet jewellery case.

“Well, I could still bring them along with me to show the ladies. After all, I can never trust these hotel chambermaids. I won’t be surprised if they steal. It’s probably better to bring my jewels along with me than to leave them in the room,” she thought.

Perking up a little at that thought of having a “valid excuse,” Catherine slipped the velvet case into her handbag.

In her high, glittering gold heels, Catherine stepped out of her

suite. She glanced at her diamond encrusted watch. She was 10 minutes late for the ladies' lunch. She touched her fingers to her perfect chignon and smoothed out an imaginary crease on her silk skirt. Catherine's phone pinged. Hurriedly, Catherine pulled the phone out of her handbag.

From afar, Lucy saw an object fall out of an immaculately dressed lady's handbag.

Lucy walked over. It was a rich velvet case. Lucy stooped down and picked it up. She opened it and gawked in disbelief at the brilliance before her. Reverently, she reached her fingers out to touch the glittering stones, tucked perfectly into the thickly padded interior. Her throat ran dry. She had never seen or touched anything so exquisite in her life.

"One of these rings could probably pay for my children's education expenses. I'd never have to worry about money again," Lucy thought. For a moment, she stood perfectly still, hearing nothing but the thoughts in her head and the rapid beating of her own heart.

Then, Lucy snapped out of her daze. Her mind was clear. She had to return the rings to the hotel guest at once.

Lucy's footsteps echoed down the quiet corridor, as she hurried after Catherine.

"Madam, please stop...your jewellery case..." Lucy called out.

Entirely preoccupied with the messages on her phone, Catherine was heedless to Lucy's calls.

Lucy quickened her pace to catch up with Catherine. She tapped her lightly on the shoulder.

Catherine turned around, saw the uniformed chambermaid and immediately snapped, "What do you want? How dare you touch me?"

Slightly intimidated, Lucy took a step back. She was momentarily tongue-tied. Her stomach fluttered a little as she struggled to

find her voice.

"Madam, I think you dropped this on the floor," Lucy explained.

Catherine gasped. Her hand flew up to cover her mouth as she stared at the velvet jewellery case in Lucy's palm. Mortified, she blushed slightly as Lucy returned the case to her.

"Thank you...Thank you so much. I...I am so sorry for my earlier rudeness. Thank you for returning this to me," Catherine said in a fluster. "Could I...could I give you some money as a reward?" Catherine offered, fumbling through her handbag to reach for her purse.

"No, no...I do not need any reward, Madam," Lucy shook her head, politely refusing the wad of notes that Catherine held out. "I really appreciate your kind thought, but I can't accept this. We take pride in honesty. I am glad to be of help and hope that you enjoy the rest of your stay in our hotel," Lucy said, giving Catherine a small smile as she bowed slightly.

Pleasure bloomed inside Lucy as she saw relief and gratitude shine in Catherine's eyes. With a slight spring in her step, Lucy walked back to her cart. It was another good day at work.

That evening, Catherine called her husband, "Dear, do you think you could write a letter to the hotel's management to commend a chambermaid called Lucy for her wonderful hospitality please?"

Her husband, puzzled at his haughty wife's unusual request, questioned, "Commend a chambermaid? Haven't you always insisted that servants like that are not worthy of your time or attention? Didn't you recently remind me not to leave my valuables in the hotel room because all these servants have no self-respect or integrity and would steal?"

Admiring the diamonds on her well-manicured fingers, Catherine smiled a tiny smile.

Sweetly, the haughty socialite said, "Well, something happened today, that caused me to have a change of heart..."

Third Place

Claudia Lim Zhi Xi, Singapore
“The Life Models”

In here, she could finally let out the emotions she had been concealing. The tears that had been suppressed for so long welled up in her beautiful blue-grey eyes. She peeled off her stilettos and slumped to the ground in front of the mirror. Hot tears coursed down her cheeks, smudging the mascara. Her body shook with violent sobs as her slender fingers clawed at her face.

“You are ugly. Your face is too fat, your nose is big and your eyes are miniscule. Frankly, you don’t look anything like a model. Whoever signed you on must be blind!”

Today’s photoshoot was bad. Far worse than bad. The names she was called, the insults thrown at her. But this was the life of a model after all. You either bear with it, or the next minute you would find yourself jobless. And she still had her daughter to think about!

“Pose for me! No, not like this! Move your arms, not flap like a bird! I think it’s just your body. You’re way too fat to be a model.”

She pinched the flesh on her arm between two fingers, wishing she could somehow make it disappear. Her stomach rumbled, but she knew she couldn’t eat. Drowning in her sorrows, she felt herself drifting off into slumber.

I just wish I could be prettier, slimmer, wealthier, more famous. If only I had these, then maybe... life would be worth living, for once.

“Ooh, this one’s gonna be interesting.”

“She is très belle! Not as much as moi, but good enough.”

“Is she rich?”

“Oh shut up, Affluence. How many followers has she got? That’s the question.”

“Look, she’s waking!”

She blinked open her eyes and was greeted by the sight of the four glowing figures atop her.

Scrambling up, she asked warily, “Who... who are you?”

The smallest figure in the form of a young girl spoke, “Hello! This is Fame, Affluence and that’s Beauty. And I’m Koe.”

She rubbed her eyes, feeling perplexed and vaguely annoyed at the sudden disturbance.

“Um, what are you doing in my house?”

“Well, the Manager sent us, of course!” Koe said cheerfully.

“You know what, I’ll handle zis, Koe,” Beauty exuded confidence and hauteur mingled with elegance, and spoke with a heavy French accent. “Enchantée. Je m’appelle Beauty. Ve vere sent by our boss, oo ve call ze Manager, to help you out.”

“So, each of us will take you on a little trip, and in the end you get to pick one of us.”

Fame was the lean teenage boy wearing shades, varsity jacket, and basic Nike shoes that looked as if they had come off a Seventeen fashion magazine. He too had the air of someone high and mighty, his charming grin picture perfect.

“I’m Fame, by the way. What’s your Instagram account?”

“Not again, Fame! Keep the conversation germane to the topic at hand, please.”

Dressed as if attending a business conference, Affluence was a stocky man with well-coiffed hair. He looked like he never stepped out of his tuxedo and bow tie. Unlike what she had expected, Affluence was not laden with jewellery or gold, but gave a rather parsimonious vibe.

“As Fame was saying, we’ll bring you on a short journey in each of our lives. When that’s done, you can choose to take on one of our worlds.”

She was completely bollixed by this strange group of beings. Nonetheless, she took Fame’s hand for her first expedition.

Fame’s World –

“Can I get an autograph?”

“Please can we take a photo?”

“Sign my shirt!”

Cameras clicked away as crazy fans crowded around them. She shuddered as she walked straight through a shrieking teenage girl. They couldn’t see her. Fame clutched her hand tightly and led her to a sleek limousine parked by the road. As they walked, the crowd did not part like the Red Sea, but rather pressed in even more, screaming for Fame to sign their caps, arms, faces... His bodyguards blocked the car door from the fans who were now reaching out, hoping to get a chance to shake Fame’s hand.

“It’s hard to get a moment of privacy around here. The paparazzi follow you everywhere. They catch your every movement and blow it up into bad publicity. Sure, the fans are sweet but they can turn downright nasty if

they don’t get what they want. You’ve got zero personal space.” Fame sighed, “Okay, I’m gonna take you back to Affluence now.”

Affluence’s World –

They were walking towards a huge mansion, complete with an Olympic-sized pool and a garden blooming with flowers. It was almost like a castle, just missing the moat. She tagged along behind Affluence, who walked as if in haste, head held high.

A lone panhandler sat on the pavement ahead of them. He was all filthy crusted clothes, tangled hair, and bristling beard. The sight of him made her heart soften. Affluence, however, paid no attention to the poor old man. He continued towards the mansion, not wavering in his stride.

“Please, good sir, could you spare a penny or two for this old chap?” He looked up at Affluence with beseeching eyes.

Affluence took one glance at the man beneath his polished Steve Madden’s and quickly looked away. He reluctantly opened his wallet, and she caught sight of a thick wad of crisp \$100 bills.

“I don’t have small change. Sorry.”

With that, Affluence pursed his lips and walked away.

Beauty’s World –

“I am going to take you back in time, to when I was in high school.”

Beauty in high school took the form of a teenage girl with long blonde hair, wide green eyes speckled with a hint of gold, and a perfect slim body. Wherever she walked past, heads would turn. The boys’ jaws would go slack, and the girls would begin pointing and gossiping in hushed tones. Yet, Beauty walked alone. No one seemed to dare get close to her. Rounding a corner, she entered a girls’ bathroom. She locked herself in one of the cubicles, and began to sob silently. Of course, she still looked immaculate when she cried. But that was enough to understand the pain and loneliness of being Beauty in the flesh.

“Zat is sufficient, I hope.”
From the corner of her eye, she saw
Beauty wipe a tear from her cheek.

Koe's World –

“So what are you going to show me?”
They were back in her house, standing
in the living room.

“I noticed you’re the only one who’s
name is different.”

“Well actually, there’s nothing much I
can show you. And, yes, I am different from
the others. My name means ‘you’ in Maori. It’s
spoken by the indigenous New Zealanders.
So, whatever I show you, you already know,
because technically this is your world. This is
your living room and kitchen, and that’s your
daughter sleeping over there...”

She looked at her precious daughter,
sound asleep, healthy and peaceful. A long-for-
gotten smile spread across her face, and finally,
she understood. True worth isn’t measured by
Fame, Affluence, or Beauty. Sure, their worlds
had seemed amazing, surreal, but even their
lives were not completely ideal. True worth is
knowing that nothing can ever be perfect, yet
being content with whatever one has. Everyone
has a purpose; we just have to realise it. She
didn’t have to change a thing about herself.
She made her decision.

“I choose you.”

Ages 13-15

First Place

**Isabel Chen
Age 15
Naperville, IL
USA
“Clovers and a Sunflower”**

Second Place

**Krystal Tan Yu Qiao
Age 14
Singapore
“Cloud Four”**

Third Place

**Caroline X. Gao
Age 14
Albany, OR
USA
“Superhero”**

First Place

Isabel Chen, Naperville, IL
"Clovers and a Sunflower"

The story begins with a girl. Her name is unimportant, but for the sake of appearances, let's call her Hana. For Hana, the world is completely black and white. Every waking hour is torture -- breathing sucked energy from her the same time it filled her lungs with air. When time felt especially merciless, it dragged like half-dead flies through honey.

Every day consists of treatment, medication, questions. Needles. Pills. Bland, diet-restricted food. Checkups followed by hushed conversations behind closed doors. They didn't need to be so secretive. Hana knows it's always bad news.

Hana's not dead, but she's not alive, either. However, she's throwing her medicine out the window instead of taking it just to speed up the process. The girl's limbs have always been heavy, but that was fine. She's confined to a hospital bed.

Another daybreak, and the first sound Hana hears is not birdcall, but the monotone beeping of a machine. There is a curtain drawn around her, but blinding sunlight leaks from around the edges. Hana is ready to heave herself through the day. But what she's not ready for is the storm that would be named Felix.

Why was Felix relocated to Hana's room that summer? Maybe the world finally decided that Hana required change. Or that she was missing something very deep inside of her. Either way, it just so happened that Felix was perfectly what she needed.

"It's nice to meet you!" was the first thing Felix said to Hana. "What's your name? How old are you? What's your favorite color?"

Hana did not have a first thing that she said to Felix until much later.

"Can you be quiet?" she asked, about a week into sharing the same room.

He only meets this question with laughter.

The next day Hana finds a small bundle of clover flowers sitting on her desk when she wakes up. It's tied with twine, and the pinkish-white florets seem to smile in the morning light. Even so, Hana can't help but notice that they are beginning to wilt ever so slightly.

Felix wakes and pulls his curtain open to find Hana staring at the clovers. He grins.

"You like them?"

Hana meets his eyes.

"When did you pick these?"

"Oh, I snuck out in the middle of the night."

There is silence as Hana registers this. That Felix broke a hard rule just to pick flowers for her was astonishing.

"You like them?" Felix repeats his question again.

Hana doesn't answer, but instead says, "Thank you."

They're pretty.

And so, Felix splashed his first drop of bright color onto Hana's canvas. Like this, the boy and girl began their small interactions. Sometimes Hana would find a small drawing of stars, a lollipop, or some other tiny gift that made Hana smile to herself. Most often, it was a clover of some type. Somehow, Felix kept finding the dainty little flowers, ranging from pinks to purples to pure whites.

"Why clovers?" Hana asks Felix.

"Because, they're pretty. They remind me of you."

Roses bloom across Hana's face, and she clutches the stems tighter.

She doesn't tell Felix that she's keeping every single one of his gifts. Each bundle is carefully separated, then pressed flat by a stack of books under her bed. She keeps his drawings and candies in a box in her desk drawer. Hana feels embarrassed that she holds so much importance in such small things, but giving them up makes it seem like she'll lose them forever. Hana doesn't realize they've already left a permanent imprint on her. Slowly, she begins to look forward to waking up each morning. Curiosity makes her excited to face each day's beginning. Hana stops throwing her medicine out the window.

For the first time since she can remember, Hana's summer flies by. The flowers only accumulate and grow in variety. There are so many that Hana begins to wake up with them caught in her hair and within the folds of her bedsheets.

Felix teases her for it, but she doesn't mind. The blossoms make her and the room smell honey-sweet, and for once, she's thankful for the easily stainable air of the hospital.

One day, during the time summer grew old and the fireflies' light began to fade, Felix dragged Hana outside at midnight. He takes her to a field behind the hospital building, a place she's never seen. Hana is scared of being caught, but it's a good, thrilling feeling.

Somewhere, owls hoot mournfully. The world is asleep. Hana glances up, and immediately her breath is stolen. She sees the stars, spread across the vast sky like a hand had tossed diamond dust across the cosmos. Even the farthest pinpricks shimmered bright polar-white.

"It's beautiful, right?" Felix turns to her and the shine of his eyes rival even the stars themselves.

Hana nods.

They fall asleep on the grass, with the stars as their blanket.

At dawn, they awaken and scurry back to their room, giggling between themselves at their new, shared secret.

Once they are safely back inside and have finally caught their breaths, Hana whispers to Felix, "Thank you."

He doesn't realize that Hana means more than just the stars.

That autumn was when the leaves donned their most beautiful color before performing their last dance. It was when Felix lost his battle against the disease that choked him from within. He went calmly.

"They've decided my time is due," Felix told Hana.

She wasn't allowed to be by him, but she's sure that he would've smiled even during his last moments.

Without his laughter, flowers, and words, Hana is broken. So much more helpless than she had been before meeting Felix. Felix, who had been the one to finally hold her together, was gone. The crumbling clovers she's collected only serve as a bitter reminder.

One morning, Hana finds a single crumpled sunflower petal on the window sill. Where it wasn't dirty and rotten, it was already dried. Hana wasn't even sure where it came from, but it was enough. There was enough strength that Felix nurtured within Hana, that she believes

the petal is his way of saying, “Don’t give up.” Hana’s biggest regret is not showing Felix that he had given her so, so much happiness. And hence, Hana shelters the vibrant color, going beyond all costs to prevent its fade.

And in winter, when the beeping quickens and the pixelated line on the monitor begins to fall flat, she breathes her last with laughter and birdsong in her heart.

Why? You may ask. Why did she die? She had finally learned how to be happy.

You are wrong. She did not die. The most important thing is, after Felix left Hana, she continued to live. She lived until the very last moment that her breath escaped her, and continued to live on even after that. She will be the easy winds that ruffle the petals of sunflowers, the pearls that gleam atop the crests of waves. When the birds awake, she will be the fresh morning dew, and when the world falls asleep, she will be the silver lining of the moon.

Because, you see, the point is not to receive a reward or some kind of happy ending in return for having optimism. Life doesn’t bend that way, and you can’t expect it to. You only truly die when you allow it to happen. The choice is in your hands. And so I hope you, too, choose to live.

Second Place

Krystal Tan Yu Qiao, Singapore
"Cloud Four"

It is really hard to deal with loss. It is a cloud that hangs sinisterly over me. Even if it feels like it is gone, it will always be there, lingering, waiting for the perfect moment to rain on my parade.

The good thing about rain is that once it rains, the sky will be clear.

Sometimes the clouds may be forlorn and overcast, but other times they are light and wispy and allow light to peak in.

This is how clouds are created and how they cease to be.

I. Evaporation

It is painful to be forcibly woken up from your sweet slumber at 1.45 a.m. It is even more painful when distressing news about a loved one is disclosed when your mind is still disoriented.

It feels like all the water from the ground vaporized; all the happiness has left your soul, leaving behind the broken fragments of various mineral salts that pierce through your hopeful heart. All the freshness and clarity of the water has left you, leaving behind a confused yet heartbroken self.

The loss of moisture, the loss of a rational mind; this is what evaporation is.

1.45 A.M. Mother hurried me down the stairs. I could hear the high-pitched wails of my aunt and the heart-wrenching sobs of my cousins echo throughout the hallways. Yet, when I actually entered the room, I felt nothing.

I watched my grandfather. He lay on the brand new bed that my mother had purchased just a day ago, wearing his signature white singlet and blue striped shorts. He looked no different from his usual sleeping form, just that his chest no longer rose and fell.

He looked the same otherwise.

He was carried into the living room. Whenever I came home from school and entered the living room, I would be greeted by the opening melody of the Chinese channel with the Phoenix as its logo, followed by him lying leisurely on his blue, red, and white wicker chair.

We do not turn on that channel anymore.

5 A.M. It was almost the usual time for me to get up for school. I watched as my grandfather lay still on the mattress. I watched his feet.

My grandmother pointed out that his feet were already facing sideways.

He would usually be up by 4.30 a.m., all ready to go to work. He always carried his briefcase and was insistent on going to work, even yesterday.

He would always be waiting at the front porch, impatiently tapping his feet with his black work shoes. The sounds would reverberate throughout our humble abode as if it were making up for his lack of speech. By 6.15 a.m. everyone would hurriedly rush into the car, and we would set off for work and school together.

It was already 6.20 a.m., and there still were no tapping sounds.

He lay there motionless, with his feet facing sideways.

As a simple-minded 10-year-old, it was hard to comprehend how someone would vanish from the face of the earth, from your life forever.

It is kind of like the water that suddenly vaporised, thrown upwards into the high sky, the universe, unclear of where it will go. Like us people.

We were left with the fragments of mineral salts from when he vanished, and his presence could still be felt.

II. Condensation and cloud congregation

I hardly wept during his passing. At least, until the day he got cremated.

It is just like how clouds do not really form until the water vapour stops lingering around the ground, and condenses into water droplets which hang aimlessly in mid-air. The truth had not fully set in until he was completely gone.

At the crematorium, we awaited the arrival of the coffin at the gallery on top. We were all wearing old white shoes. It was part

of a tradition: once we left the place, we had to throw them away.

We watched from above as the coffin was slowly wheeled in. There was little response from all of us; we were unsure of what was going on. It was only when my grand-aunt hollered “祝你一路走好!”—that garnered a reaction from us.

I could not control the tears that formed in my eyes from running down my countenance, the strangled noises emitted from my throat, the pain that slowly ate me inside.

He's gone.

There was a period of 49 days where we had to carry out rites in order to allow him to have a better afterlife. An altar was set up in the corner of our living room. After the 49th day, it would be removed.

Coincidentally, the 49th day was my 11th birthday and a school day.

I had hoped to say a proper goodbye to him on my birthday. But by the time I got home, it was too late.

The corner of the living room was empty.

It felt like my heart was twisting in the most grotesque way, like my entire world was collapsing right in front of my eyes. It was the most I have ever cried on my birthday.

That was the greatest regret in my life.

Each teardrop formed a part of the enlarging cloud in my heart. It grew darker and larger as the days went past. It clouded my vision, it swept me up in a suffocating cloud, it washed my entire world in grey.

It was hard to deal with the loss and this overwhelming cloud congregation.

I deleted all the pictures of him on my phone. I could not even bear to have a glance at any picture of him, for my heart would pulsate painfully in my chest.

Every year during the anniversary, I would weep at the staircase I had descended on the day of his passing.

As the years passed, slowly but surely, the dreams of my grandfather ceased to be.

III. Rain

When there are too many water droplets in the sky, when the burden is too heavy, it starts to rain. But rain is a beautiful process, for it washes away dirt from the streets and leaves behind a refreshing feel in the air.

1st July 2019, it will be the *fourth year* death anniversary of my grandfather. I can safely say that I have nearly fully accepted the harsh reality.

It feels much lighter than before; it feels like the cloud in my heart has dispersed, and that my worries have been washed away.

I do not think I will ever get over this, for clouds are always in our skies. But the clouds are less heavy and the sky is clearer.

For now, instead of mourning the deaths of the deceased, I celebrate the lives of those who have lived before. Rather than brood over the conversations I never had, the many regrets I still have, I shall treasure the memories of my grandfather waiting for my arrival at home every night, no matter how late, helping me with my maths homework at his signature work table, and the attentiveness he gave me whenever I played the piano.

There is still lingering sadness, but also a drop of sweetness, a bittersweet feeling. It is enough.

Third Place

Caroline X. Gao, Albany, OR
“Superhero”

The garage door of Charlie Henderson’s home screeched open, baring back its wide jowls and swallowing Dad’s Camaro whole. There once existed a time when Dad’s arrival home from work sparked joy in Charlie’s heart; every afternoon, elementary-aged Charlie would sprawl across his Spider-Man bed sheets and alternate between perusing the latest Marvel comic book and pressing his face against the window in the hopes that Dad’s car would appear.

Now, at 16 years old, few things remained the same. Charlie still cherished all his superhero memorabilia and passed most evenings in his Marvel-themed bedroom, but when Charlie furtively glanced through the slits of his blinds every few minutes, trepidation rather than anticipation filled his gaze. Today, watching the all-too-familiar gray coupe pull in sent apprehensive chills through Charlie’s body.

As Dad entered the house, he walked past Charlie’s bedroom door without greeting him — a sure sign of a tumultuous mood. The evening wore on in ambient quietness, but Charlie could feel the air crackle with tension. By the time Charlie sat down with his parents for their daily family dinner, it seemed inevitable to him that something would snap.

Mom began the conversation and queried, “Tyrone, how was your day at work?”

Dad lifted his head, eyebrows raised superciliously.

“I drive a garbage truck all day, Whitney. What is there for you to know? And if anything, you should be asking yourself about your day at work — which baby threw up on you today? This chicken is awful, like it came from that depressing hospital you work at. Somehow, you managed to ruin the only dish I thought you could make.”

Mom lowered her head silently; Charlie desperately wanted to defend her, to describe her grueling shifts as a neonatal nurse, but he knew Dad was already in control.

A malicious smirk flashed across Dad’s face, and he said nonchalantly, “You know, I collect all the garbage in this suburb, and you two are the saddest pieces of trash I’ve ever seen. Both of you would be on the streets in a second without me telling you how to live life.”

“Not now, Tyrone, please,” Mom sighed.

Dad abruptly shoved his chair to the ground.

With newborn infernos blazing in his eyes, he shouted, “I will

say and do whatever I want, whenever I want! Nobody besides me makes rules here, and it's about time you understood that."

"Charlie, baby, could you please go to your room?" Mom murmured. "We just need a moment."

Her flimsy smile tremored, on the verge of peeling away. But maybe Mom could pacify Dad tonight; maybe tonight would be different, free of shrieks and sobs and terrible thuds. Charlie told himself the same lies each time, yet he never failed to believe them.

As Charlie reluctantly rose from his seat, Dad kicked the table leg and pointed a finger at Charlie.

"And you, Charlie, you remember that the only reason you can leave is that I'm letting you leave. It really is pathetic: you don't even have the will to resist anything your weak little mother tells you," he scoffed. "You'll never be a real man."

"Tyrone, don't!" Mom cried.

Dad turned around slowly, his spittle-riddled teeth gleaming. Suddenly, he stormed toward her, each stomp a battle cry. He swung an apelike arm toward Mom's head and sent her flying across the room.

Charlie stood still, petrified by his most horrendous recurring nightmare. But a single thought emerged in his mind, repeating itself incessantly and drowning out everything else: *Mom is getting beat up.*

Without willing his body to move, Charlie found himself sprinting toward Dad and yanking Dad's arm away from Mom's neck.

"Stop!" Charlie shrieked. "Just stop it, Dad! Stop hurting Mom, stop hurting me, and stop ruining our family! I don't know why you started playing the bad guy, but I can tell you that all it's done is make you a hateful, cruel-hearted egomaniac who abuses everyone he loves. You know you don't have any real power. So why do you do it, Dad? Why?"

For a moment, a flicker of light illuminated Dad's empty eyes, as if a curtain that had previously shut out all the recollections and remorse had been snatched away. Somewhere in there, within the darkness of a vil-

lain, there lay the heart of a hero. But it was exposed for no more than a second, and a bitter shadow of ire quickly eclipsed his face.

"Respect...my...household," Dad growled, his voice all jagged rocks and rusty knives.

Charlie gulped down his fear, as well as the acidic sourness beginning to rise in his throat. It took one infinitely long second before Charlie finally recalled what he needed to know in order to respond: the basic forms of property ownership, and that the best superheroes are full of witty one-liners.

"Well, technically, you and Mom are joint owners through tenancy by the entirety and..."

POW! POW! POW!

Charlie lay sprawled across the floor. Everything felt numb yet stung at the same time, as if Dad's punches were infused with venom that now surged through Charlie's bloodstream. How could such pain have come from a father's fists? Knowing that this tornado of terror and anguish tore through Charlie's mother almost every month made tears stream out Charlie's eyes and pool onto the ground.

"I miss you, Dad," Charlie whispered. "I miss you."

"STOP CRYING!" Dad bellowed.

The dull tingling of Charlie's body was suddenly shattered by foot-sized bullets striking his stomach, his back, his sides, everywhere. Screams from Mom and screams from Dad blended together and echoed endlessly in Charlie's pulsating eardrums. Suddenly, a higher, more structured wailing pierced the murky cacophony — a siren, perhaps? Before Charlie's eyes there appeared a flash of red, then a flash of blue, then undiluted darkness.

Charlie's eyelids fluttered open slowly, as if laden down with viscous honey.

"...Charlie...Hey there, Charlie," a delicate, distant voice sharpened into focus. "It's Mom, honey. Everything's all right; you were unconscious for an hour, and we're in the hospital now. Don't try to sit up — you've got a cracked rib and lots of bruises — but you'll be all healed up in one or two months, and if

you're feeling okay, we can discharge you as early as tomorrow."

Charlie stared vapidly for a moment.

"He's not coming back?" he asked.

Mom shut her eyes for several seconds, flicking away a tear when she opened them.

"He's not. The neighbors were walking their dog by our house and heard...well, they heard it, and they called the police. He's in custody now, and he'll go on trial in a couple weeks."

She let out a sigh carrying the weight of the universe before continuing, "I'm so sorry, Charlie. I thought he loved us; I thought I was helping him. But nobody — absolutely nobody — ever hurts my son."

Mom gazed at Charlie wistfully and planted a gentle kiss on his cheek.

"I love him, but I love you more, Charlie. He's never going to hurt us again," she whispered. "Thank you. For everything."

Charlie contorted his contused, swollen features into a smile as best as he could. Every last bruise was worth it, though. He would have relived every kick, every punch, and every scream from his father if it meant arriving at this current, beautiful moment of peace. Because now, at last, he knew what it meant to be a superhero.

Ages 16-18

First Place

**Esther J. Yoong
Age 16
Singapore
“Dry Spell”**

Second Place

**Yunju Lee
Age 16
Peachtree City, GA
USA
“Birds in Autumn”**

Third Place

**Brooke Alexandria Jacobs
Age 17
Chevy Chase, MD
USA
“The Procession”**

First Place

Esther J. Yoong, Singapore
“Dry Spell”

Currently, I live with my little nephew. His name is Atilio. He’s been in my care ever since he lost both of his parents a while ago. He’s got his mother’s colouring and the moles right under his father’s eyes. He’s eight years old and he’s settled nicely into primary school. He has a band of fellows who come over to the apartment on the weekends to use my PlayStation. I pour fruit juices for them in the summer and hot cocoa in the winter, and so I know all of them by name—León, Seve, and Paco. His favourite colour is red, but it used to be green. He falls asleep at the drop of a hat once the clock strikes 8:45. He tends to hiccup when he laughs too hard. He’s used his small fingers to grip the cuffs of my winter jacket so often that there’s now a second hole on the left sleeve. He’s absolutely the light of my life and I love him very much.

He also absolutely cannot spell.

I’ve spent about two years’ worth of evenings dutifully poring over his activity sheets from school, and they’re positively unreadable.

It’s remarkably difficult to make a case for his language processing skills, but it’s not for a lack of trying on his end. In instances like this I give myself a couple of seconds to process the error, fumble for the ballpoint pen on his desk, draw a thin green line under the offending word, and write the word’s correct spelling right beside it, my neat green print jarring next to his haphazard pencil scrawls both under and over the blank.

“Atilio, do you understand that?” I ask him, and he always looks attentively at me with his clear, grey eyes and nods with good vigour.

He methodically erases the word from the paper, careful not to tear it with too much force, and apes my example as precisely as he can, resulting in sporadic spikes of uncharacteristically good penmanship on his worksheets that are scarcely replicated. Then he comes home from school the next week with the same word spelled wrong in an entirely different way.

If anyone had asked me about this a couple years ago, I’d be endlessly forgiving of him; what caretaker wouldn’t? I took very much for granted that he’d grow out of it eventually with practice, but he just seems to have been confusing himself more the more he tries. Again, Atilio’s situation is not uncommon of little boys his age. But it still worries me to death, and perhaps for more selfish of a reason than I’d ordinarily admit.

The thing is, I'm a language student through and through, always have been. I've scraped past my 40th birthday in the autumn, through phenomenally gritted teeth, and the written word has been my sustenance for exactly that long. I didn't have the best home life growing up, and reading and writing were how I kept myself lively. I wiped the lacquer clean with my opponents in inter-school spelling bees. I whiled away half of my 20s evading military enlistment in lecture halls dedicated to literature and lexicon, and came out with a deck of language degrees of wildly varying levels of practical use. Then I got a job at the city library, and I stayed there long enough to become a voice of authority on what's available there, as well as to cast disapproving glances on interns in earphones who think having skimmed the summaries of their summer reading on Wikipedia renders them worthy of legitimate literary discussion with full-timers. I moderate two literature forums on the internet. My eyesight has reduced me to buying glasses as expensive as furniture.

The point I'm trying to make is that Atilio has been reading books, which is what most people recommend. I can't leave him alone at home at his age, so I pick him up from his school during my lunch breaks, and take him to the library. There, he obediently sets up shop at a log-shaped children's table in the corner, and watches me cart books around, or takes an afternoon nap with his jacket as a pillow, or judiciously selects a small pile of colourful books to examine on his own.

The point I'm trying to make is that he isn't just admiring the pictures; I'm sure of that, because sometimes I have to sprint to his side to remind him to keep his reading aloud less loud. So, he is reading the books. He can read the books, or at least he doesn't have trouble seeing the words. I asked his regular doctor about that before, regrettably desperate. Of course, I would have; I'm the kind of person who covers all my bases when it comes to Atilio, and he tested normally.

Maybe the point I'm trying to make is that the fact that Atilio can't spell can't be my fault. I've been doing everything that I could

possibly do, that any good caretaker could possibly do. Some kids throw mad tantrums in public, some kids lose control of their bladders when around expensive upholstery, Atilio cannot spell. These are merely the cards he has been dealt in his meagre life. The thought slips into my mind, on evenings when I am feeling particularly lonely, that if Atilio were my true son, he would be able to spell not only acceptably, but well.

I hate myself for thinking this at all. It's downright poisonous. Atilio is my true son. He's also my sister's son. And my beloved sister, bless her soul, was herself an absolutely atrocious speller.

At night, when the lights were barely on downstairs and our parents were taking it out on each other, she paid me in pocket change and chewy candy to forge signatures on her single-digit spelling scores. Until she dropped out of high school her papers were completely plagued with amateur mistakes, and I went off on her because of that. I berated her, unquestionably a lot more harshly than I had any right to, and because of that we argued often. I was worried for her future. She said she wasn't ever going to be good at it anyway. I hated that she'd never be able to share the things I loved. She hated that that was the reason why I said I hated her.

She managed to grow up, she managed to make good of her 31 years on earth. She was the strongest woman I knew, and she was utterly protective of her Atilio most of all. She loved me to bits. I asked her why once. She said it was because I basically raised her.

She's gone, so is her husband, who is Atilio's father. I basically raise Atilio now. I never intended to have children. Atilio is the light of my life, but he is the source of every single one of my headaches and anxieties every day. And maybe the point I'm trying to make to myself is that in exchange for that, I at least deserve or am entitled to a family who will be able to share in the very discipline an achingly lonely bachelor of 40 years such as myself finds such passion, life and happiness in.

Atilio has no such selfish duty to me. I know that, but sometimes I forget.

The duty I have to Atilio, however, is of the only family he has left. This I'd rather die than forget.

On the second of October, when the green leaves of the trees along the sidewalks turned red and slowly fell to the ground, I turned 40. I went to pick up Atilio from school, as usual. I pried him off the sleeves of my winter jacket and parked him at his regular table at the corner of the library.

I flipped the lanyard around my neck correctly and headed back for the librarians' office.

"Tío, come here," Atilio said too loudly, and I sprinted back to muffle him.

He blinked.

"Sorry," he whispered, and stuck his hands into his school-bag. "I made you something," he said, grinning, at the same inappropriate volume he spoke at earlier.

Then he hiccupped.

Before I could chide him again, he pressed a paper booklet into my hands. I squatted down next to him, examining its contents. It was a story book, made of marker drawings on construction paper lopsidedly stapled together. It was about a librarian who gets transported to a fantasy world through a magic bookcase, who wears thick glasses that might cost the same as furniture. This I got from the plot summary written at the back in pencil chicken-scratch (according to Atilio, like the proper story books do). A subtitle underneath read *written by Atilio Demetrio Márquez*.

"It's for your birthday," Atilio said straightforwardly. "I made it during recess. I checked it twice for the spelling. I asked León, Seve and Paco to help me."

I sat down on the lacquer, looking down. I felt Atilio's hands on my head as I flipped through the gift's contents. It had so many spelling errors that it was positively unreadable. Or maybe I couldn't see them clearly. I took off my glasses because I was crying.

Second Place

Yunju Lee, Peachtree City, GA
"Birds in Autumn"

"Have you ever gone bird-watching?"

Those were the first words she said to me. She was my neighbor's granddaughter, only in town for a short visit. She would leave in three weeks, yet those three weeks with her changed my life.

The day she arrived, the winds had shifted, bringing in a crisp, autumn breeze. The autumn winds blew in from the north, pushing away the hot, humid air that had suffocated the town. The townspeople began to come out of their houses.

I, on the other hand, preferred to stay inside. I was not very social and the idea of meeting people scared me. I enjoyed keeping myself in my room where there were no people to judge me. Inside that room, I drew. A dead beetle, a rope, and a rotten apple. My parents disapproved; they saw no value in my drawings. To me, however, my drawings were my feelings. They were things that I couldn't express in words. They were part of me. Only one person ever took the time to listen, and that was she.

I first heard about her from my mom. "She rode the train in from Montana," my mom told me.

I nodded and continued to draw the withered flowers that were set on the tabletop.

"She's your age," my mom continued. "You should meet her."

I had no intention to meet her and I told my mom so, but I ended up getting dragged out of the house. Not wanting to fight with my mom, I leaned back on the fence that separated my house and the neighbor's and started to draw some of the fallen leaves.

Suddenly, a head popped up from the top of the fence.

"Have you ever gone bird-watching?"

I looked up in surprise. It was a girl, the granddaughter, I presumed. She had long hair and eyes that twinkled like stars. Wind blew through her hair, gentle and calm. She stared at me with her sparkly eyes, head cocked slightly to the side, and I realized that she had asked me a question.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

She grinned.

"Have you ever gone bird-watching? Because I'm going right now, and I don't feel like going by myself."

"Bird-watching?" I asked.

"Yeah! A lot of birds are on their migratory paths right now,

and they're going to pass over this town. I was thinking of going into the field and taking pictures of some of them."

"Sorry, I don't go out much," I said bluntly.

I assumed that the girl would take the hint and leave. Instead, she jumped the fence and took a seat next to me.

"That's fine, we can watch the birds here too!" she smiled, and her eyes seemed to twinkle even brighter.

She stretched her long, thin arms.

"I like to take pictures of nature, you see," she started to explain.

I noticed the camera hanging off of her neck.

"Life is so beautiful, and I love being able to capture it and show it to others. Do you want to see some of my pictures?"

Without waiting for a reply, she pulled up some of the pictures saved on her camera. There was a dragonfly, hovering near a bright red flower in full bloom. There was an apple tree, full of fruit. She explained the story behind every picture with such passion that I couldn't help but get sucked in.

"I saw you drawing something over there, do you mind if I have a look?"

I stared at her blankly. I did not think that a person so lively and so full of light would be interested in my drawings of death and darkness. But the twinkle in her eyes was mesmerizing and I found myself nodding.

"Wow," she said, as she flipped through the pages.

For some reason, I felt nervous, nervous that this girl would reject me like the other people of this town. Instead, she looked at me with excited eyes.

"These drawings are really good!" she exclaimed.

"Really?" I asked, almost shyly.

"Yeah! I feel like I know you, even though we've never met before. Your drawings tell a lot about you, you know."

I couldn't speak. No one had ever understood that I was trying to express myself through my drawings before. I wanted to say something, probably something stupid and

incomprehensible, but thankfully she stopped me.

"Look, the birds!"

Above us was a flock of white geese flying in V-formation. She grabbed her camera and began to take pictures.

"Aren't they beautiful?" she whispered. And I couldn't help but agree.

We met often after that. I would find myself waiting for her by the fence, sketchbook in hand. She would climb over the fence and we would talk for a while until one of us saw a bird. Days with her passed quickly ... too quickly.

The last day she was in town, I was observing a white wildflower on the ground. She popped her head from the top of the fence like any other day.

"Hey," she greeted.

"Hey," I smiled.

She looked at me carefully.

"Would you like to go bird-watching in the fields today?" she asked.

"Why in the fields today?" I asked, confused.

She jumped the fence.

"I'm leaving tomorrow."

Something in my heart broke. I knew that she would have to leave some day, but I didn't know that it would be so quick. I was about to say no, but then, I saw her face. Though she was smiling, it wasn't as bright as usual, and her eyes weren't twinkling. I realized that she didn't want to leave either.

I smiled and took her hand.

"Let's go."

We sat in the fields and stared up at the sky. The fields were empty as the harvest had already passed. Yet it did not feel empty. I was there, and so was she. The wind blew softly between us. It was peaceful.

"I really enjoyed my time here," she started. "I'm going to miss you when I leave."

"I will too," I said.

"When I was little," she said, "my biggest wish was to have wings like a bird. I would be able to fly anywhere I wanted to go. Birds are freer than any creature I know."

She smiled at me.

“But then, I found photography. Photography became my wings. I loved taking pictures of everything. Things that made me happy. I finally felt free.”

She turned back to the sky.

“The day I took a picture of a bird, I felt like I had won the world. I captured the free bird in a single shot,” she laughed. “It’s a little silly, now that I think about it.”

The wind went still. We sat in silence. I wanted to say something.

“M-“

A honk cut through the air. We both looked up. Above us were a flock of geese, just like the ones we saw the first day we met.

I couldn’t say anything to her, and I couldn’t bring myself to send her off. She left without a word.

A week went by before I could bring myself to go out again. The wind was blowing softly. Children were out playing and adults were talking to each other.

I sat down and opened to the first page in my new sketchbook. I started drawing the white flower next to me.

Third Place

Brooke Alexandria Jacobs, Chevy Chase, MD
“The Procession”

My grandmother told me stories about how girls and boys used to dream of finding “true love” and happiness. Life was a game of chance. Nothing was predictable, and if you were lucky, one day you would be consistently at peace. Grandma snuck old novels and books into my room when I was little. She read the likes of Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Mark Twain, and more of the creatives who offered dreams in the form of transcendental words. My parents never knew how she was filling my head with nonsense about a grand search for contentment or some sort of higher power controlling the world from the skies.

The older generation had the option to not get the injection when it first came out. But who wouldn’t want it? Pain, misery, and disappointment would no longer exist with this miraculous tool. All your worries? Gone. A long time ago, with my eyebrows furrowed and pre-pubescent forehead creased, I asked my grandmother why she declined to get the shot.

She answered simply, “Freedom.”

I guess that word means something more to her than it does to me. Freedom is what caused world wars, unspeakable discrimination, senseless anger... I could go on. Life sounded pretty awful to say the least.

I flick on the lights and rub my eyes. This is the last day of my dark schooling. After I officially graduate from high school, I’ll be eligible for the injection. When I look at my parents, all I see are smiles on their faces. They radiate the pure joy and enlightenment that humanity used to hopelessly search for.

My grandmother passed away dark. She always told us that she wanted a funeral when she died, but the federal government outlawed celebrations of death decades ago. In some states, funerals are allowed but the enlightened are barred from hosting or attending them. I trudged through the muddy cemetery on that rainy Sunday morning to her funeral, alone. Agents of the state lowered her casket into the ground and let me have a few final moments with her.

And that was it.

It’s weird to think about how someone is bursting with life and energy one moment and then simply gone the next. Her stuff still sits in her room. I can still hear her voice and the smell of her Chanel perfume on her knitting.

It’s weird, too, how my mother, the daughter of my grand-

mother, can still have that same smile plastered on her face and that unwavering joyful aura even after the woman who raised her recently joined the ranks of Hades. How could one simple injection take away the hurt you feel when a loved one passes? How could the injection possibly take away the hurt I felt when death stole my grandmother's warmth from me?

I arrived back home on Sunday morning to see my parents laughing and making a delightful lemon meringue pie. For the first time in my life, I thought I saw a flicker of something other than happiness in my mother's eyes when she saw my tear stained face and muddy boots contaminate our welcome mat, but not a moment later, the smile was back on her face. And for the first time in my life, I doubted *The Process*.

I quickly shower, brush my teeth, and throw on some clothes. My curly black hair spills over my eyes, just how I like it. I say a quick hello to my parents. It's not like they'll feel any sadness if I don't sit down and talk to them. I hop in my car and head to school.

My high school is nothing like those old drama movies. From birth, I was put into a group with other people my age. These are the people I have spent my entire life with. Although we learn and grow with the same group throughout our childhood and adolescence, most students decide that forming close relationships isn't worth it because of the likely possibility that we will never see each other again. When I graduate tonight, the administration will tell each person in my group what field of work they will be put in. And then, as they hand each one of us our diplomas, they will ask us, extending a microphone to our smiling mouths, whether we want the injection. If the answer is yes, they administer the injection to the student on stage. If the answer is no, eyes stare at the student in disbelief.

Sometimes, I wonder... Do I want to be trapped in the confines of *The Process*, never to figure life out for myself? The thing is, I don't have a real choice.

When the proctor on stage asks me, "Do you, Gray Adler, want the injection?" it will be a mere formality.

There is only one right answer.

As I stare at the perfectly spaced trees and the mechanical bees flitting from plant to plant through the clear window of the bus, life never seemed so automated. Without the injection, how could anyone survive such monotony?

The school day proceeds as normal. No excitement. Minimal chatter. Scratchy chalkboards. Dreary lunch. Smiling teachers. But something is different. The looming destiny weighs harsher on the faces of the students. I knew as soon as I looked into my best friend's eyes. His face was painted with a disguised pain that I know I matched. He and I used to pass notes, telling stories about escaping the country and seeking asylum in a place that doesn't practice life in the way we do. I watch him as he nervously plays with his pencil.

I draw a few constellations on a piece of paper and write, "Are you excited?"

I throw it under his desk. Well-rehearsed, he pretends like he's dropped something and picks up the note. I see him furrow his eyebrows. Not 30 seconds later, I feel the paper hit the top of my shoe.

It reads, "Not when I know I may never see you again. I guess I won't care as soon as I feel the injection hit my bloodstream."

In that moment, I could've cried.

I sit in the backseat of the car on the way to the ceremony. My white dress, decorated with floral patterns, takes up most of the space. A white veil rests on top of my head, symbolizing my marriage to and my future with *The Process*.

I stand in line, waiting for the proctor to call me on the stage. I watch as the girls and boys I've grown up with stand, grinning from ear to ear, as the proctor injects them with happiness in a bottle. A sick feeling grows in the pit of my stomach.

And finally, my name is called.

I watch as my father and mother stand and clap. I try to feel joy and excitement as I take steps toward my destiny.

Suddenly, I hear another voice call my name. I see my best friend staring back at me, his eyes frantically searching mine.

He mouths, “Don’t do it.”

I feel my chest tighten and my breath quicken. Strangely, my face melts into a smile. I feel a sense of relief wash over me. He’s given me a choice.

“Do you, Gray Adler, want the injection?”

I look straight into the audience of unworried faces, ready to choose the rest of my life.