



THE GOLDEN QUILL  
LITERARY PRIZE  
2026



A  
LEGACY GAZETTE  
SPECIAL ISSUE

ALIZEH TAHIR

THE UNSEEN EDGE:

NAVIGATING A 3D WORLD WITH 2D TOOLS

GOLD AWARD WINNER

9<sup>TH</sup> - 12<sup>TH</sup> GRADE CATEGORY

THE WORLD, FOR MOST PEOPLE, IS A PANORAMIC EXPERIENCE —A SEAMLESS 180-DEGREE SWEEP OF COLOR AND MOVEMENT. FOR ME, THE WORLD HAS ALWAYS BEEN A BIT MORE SELECTIVE. AS A SURVIVOR OF RETINOBLASTOMA, I HAVE BEEN BLIND IN MY LEFT EYE SINCE I WAS THREE MONTHS OLD. FOR A LONG TIME, I VIEWED THIS AS A QUIET VULNERABILITY, A HIDDEN FRACTURE IN MY FOUNDATION. YET, IN THE HIGH-STAKES ARENAS OF COMPETITIVE FIGURE SKATING AND MUSICAL PERFORMANCE, I DISCOVERED THAT MY BLIND SIDE WAS NOT A DEFICIT; IT WAS THE FORGE THAT TEMPERED WHAT I NOW CALL MY UNSEEN EDGE.

FOR A LONG TIME, I CARRIED THIS AS A QUIET, BRITTLE SECRET. I DIDN'T WANT TO BE "THE GIRL WITH THE BLIND SIDE." I JUST WANTED TO BE A NORMAL GIRL WHO COULD SKATE, DANCE, AND MAKE MUSIC.

IN THE EARLY DAYS, MY COURAGE DIDN'T NEED A GOLD MEDAL. IT NEEDED A NEEDLE AND THREAD. ON ICE, I HAD TO PROTECT MY REMAINING EYE, I WORE SPECIALIZED GOGGLES THAT WOULD FOG UP THE MOMENT I BEGAN TO BREATHE. TO KEEP THEM FROM FLYING OFF DURING A JUMP, A SPIN OR JOINING A FAST MOVING SKATING LINEUP, I WOULD SIT IN THE LOCKER ROOM, METICULOUSLY SEWING THE STRAPS INTO MY OWN HAIR. IT WAS A HUMBLE, FRUSTRATING RITUAL. WHILE OTHER SKATERS WERE WARMING UP THEIR MOVES, I WAS STRUGGLING JUST TO SEE PAST THE BLUR OF MY OWN BREATH TRAPPED AGAINST THE GLASS. I SPENT YEARS AS THE "ALTERNATE"—THE GIRL WAITING IN THE STANDS, THE ONE WHO PLACED DEAD LAST AT THE BAY STATE GAMES AFTER TRAVELING ALL NIGHT BETWEEN VARIOUS SKATING

DISCIPLINES AND BACK TO BACK COMPETITIONS. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN EASY TO BLAME MY MONOVISION OR THE EXHAUSTION OF THE ROAD. INSTEAD, I BEGAN TO CULTIVATE A "WITHOUT COMPLAINT" PHILOSOPHY, GIVING UP ON BLAMING MY FAILURES ON MY EYES. INSTEAD, I REALIZED THAT TO BE AN ATHLETE WITH ONE EYE, I COULDN'T JUST BE AS GOOD AS MY PEERS. I HAD TO BE BETTER. TO ACHIEVE A LEVEL THAT WAS SIMILAR TO MY TWO EYED PEERS. I HAD TO SURPASS THEIR TALENTS AND WORK TWICE AS HARD JUST TO MAINTAIN MY POSITION ON THE PODIUMS. IN THOSE MOMENTS I HAD DOUBTED MY ABILITIES, AND MY VULNERABILITY FELT LIKE A HEAVY COAT I COULDN'T TAKE OFF. I DIDN'T HAVE AN "EDGE" YET; I JUST HAD A LOT OF BRUISES AND A FOGGED UP VIEW OF THE ICE.

THE ICE IS A DANGEROUS PLACE WHEN YOU CAN'T SEE WHAT'S COMING FROM THE LEFT. IN SYNCHRONIZED SKATING, WE MOVE LIKE A SINGLE ORGANISM AT HIGH SPEEDS. I LIVED IN A STATE OF CALCULATED RISK, CONSTANTLY SCANNING, HEAD ALWAYS TURNING, TRYING TO COMPENSATE FOR THE GHOST IN MY PERIPHERY. BUT A STRANGE THING HAPPENS WHEN YOU LACK A SENSE: THE OTHERS WAKE UP.

MUSIC PROVIDED A PARALLEL TRACK FOR THIS GROWTH. AS A KEYBOARDIST AND VOCALIST—REACHING THE FINALS OF "NEWTON HAS TALENT" WITH MY FAMILY BAND—I HAD TO OVERCOME "VOCAL DRONING." BECAUSE I COULDN'T SEE THE KEYS WHILE FACING THE MICROPHONE, I WOULD INSTINCTIVELY TURN MY HEAD, CAUSING MY VOICE TO FADE. TO FIX IT, I STOPPED RELYING ON MY EYE AND STARTED RELYING ON MY MUSCLE MEMORY. WITH SKATING, I STOPPED

TRYING TO SEE THE RINK AND STARTED TRYING TO FEEL IT. I LEARNED THE TOPOGRAPHY OF THE ICE THROUGH THE VIBRATION IN MY BLADES. IN MUSIC, I LEARNED THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE PIANO KEYS NOT BY LOOKING AT THEM, BUT BY THE SPECIFIC, FAMILIAR STRETCH OF THE TENDONS IN MY HAND. I HAD TO BE MORE INTENTIONAL THAN MY PEERS. I COULDN'T AFFORD TO BE CARELESS, SO I BECAME PRECISE. MY "WEAKNESS" WAS ACTUALLY A DEMANDING TEACHER, FORCING ME TO DEVELOP A LEVEL OF CONCENTRATION THAT I REALIZE NOW WAS A GIFT.

BUT THESE PHYSICAL HURDLES DIDN'T SLOW ME DOWN, THEY SHARPENED MY OTHER SENSES. BY 2022, THE "ALTERNATE" SKATER WAS GONE. I WAS A REGULAR MEMBER OF THE JUVENILE SYNCHRONIZED SKATING TEAM, TAKING 2ND AT THE EASTERN REGIONALS AND 8TH AT THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS. I REALIZED THAT BECAUSE I HAD TO WORK TWICE AS HARD TO STAY SAFE, I WAS INADVERTENTLY PRACTICING WITH A LEVEL OF CONCENTRATION THAT OTHERS LACKED. MY "CAUTIOUSNESS" HAD EVOLVED INTO A DISCIPLINED PRECISION. MY VULNERABILITY WAS BECOMING MY UNSEEN EDGE.

THE TRUE TEST OF THIS COURAGE CAME AS I MOVED INTO THE SENIOR LEVELS, WHERE THE MARGIN FOR ERROR DISAPPEARS. IN 2023, I RETURNED TO THE BAY STATE GAMES—THE SITE OF MY PREVIOUS "LAST PLACE" FINISH—AND TOOK THE GOLD MEDAL. THAT SAME YEAR, I EARNED A BRONZE AT THE NATIONAL EXCEL SERIES SKATING CHAMPIONSHIPS. THE GIRL WHO USED TO STRUGGLE WITH THE FOG IN HER GOGGLES WAS NOW STANDING ON NATIONAL PODIUMS.

BY 2025, MY ADAPTATION HAD BECOME MASTERY. I ACHIEVED THE US FIGURE SKATING GOLD MEDAL FOR SENIOR LEVEL MOVES IN THE FIELD—A TEST OF PURE EDGE WORK AND CONTROL THAT REQUIRES PERFECT SPATIAL AWARENESS. THAT SAME YEAR, MY THEATER ON ICE TEAM, OVERTURE OF BOSTON, BECAME NATIONAL CHAMPIONS.

BY THE TIME I STAND ON THE PODIUM AT THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS, REPRESENTING MY COUNTRY AT THE 2026 NATIONS CUP, THE MEDALS FEEL LESS LIKE "WINS" AND MORE LIKE THANK-YOU NOTES TO MY YOUNGER SELF. THE GIRL WHO SEWED HER GOGGLES INTO HER HAIR HAD FINALLY FOUND HER COURAGE.

I REALIZED THEN THAT I WASN'T SKATING DESPITE MY BLIND SIDE. I WAS SKATING BECAUSE OF IT. IT HAD GIVEN ME A WAY OF MOVING THROUGH THE WORLD THAT RELIED ON SOUL AND MUSCLE MEMORY RATHER THAN JUST OPTICS.

SHARING THIS STORY THROUGH MY BOOK, EYERIS, WAS PERHAPS THE MOST VULNERABLE JUMP I'VE EVER ATTEMPTED. IT MEANT ADMITTING THAT I WAS ONCE A SCARED CHILD WITH A MALIGNANT TUMOR. BUT IN BEING HONEST ABOUT THAT FRACTURE, I FOUND A WAY TO CONNECT WITH OTHERS.

TODAY, WHEN I ARRIVE AT BOSTON CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL AS A PATIENT AND MEET OTHER PATIENTS, I DON'T GO AS A "CHAMPION." I GO AS SOMEONE WHO KNOWS WHAT IT'S LIKE TO NAVIGATE A BLURRY ROOM. I TELL THEM THAT WHEN ONE WINDOW CLOSES, THE MIND DOESN'T STAY IN THE DARK. IT JUST LEARNS TO SEE THE GLOW COMING FROM UNDERNEATH

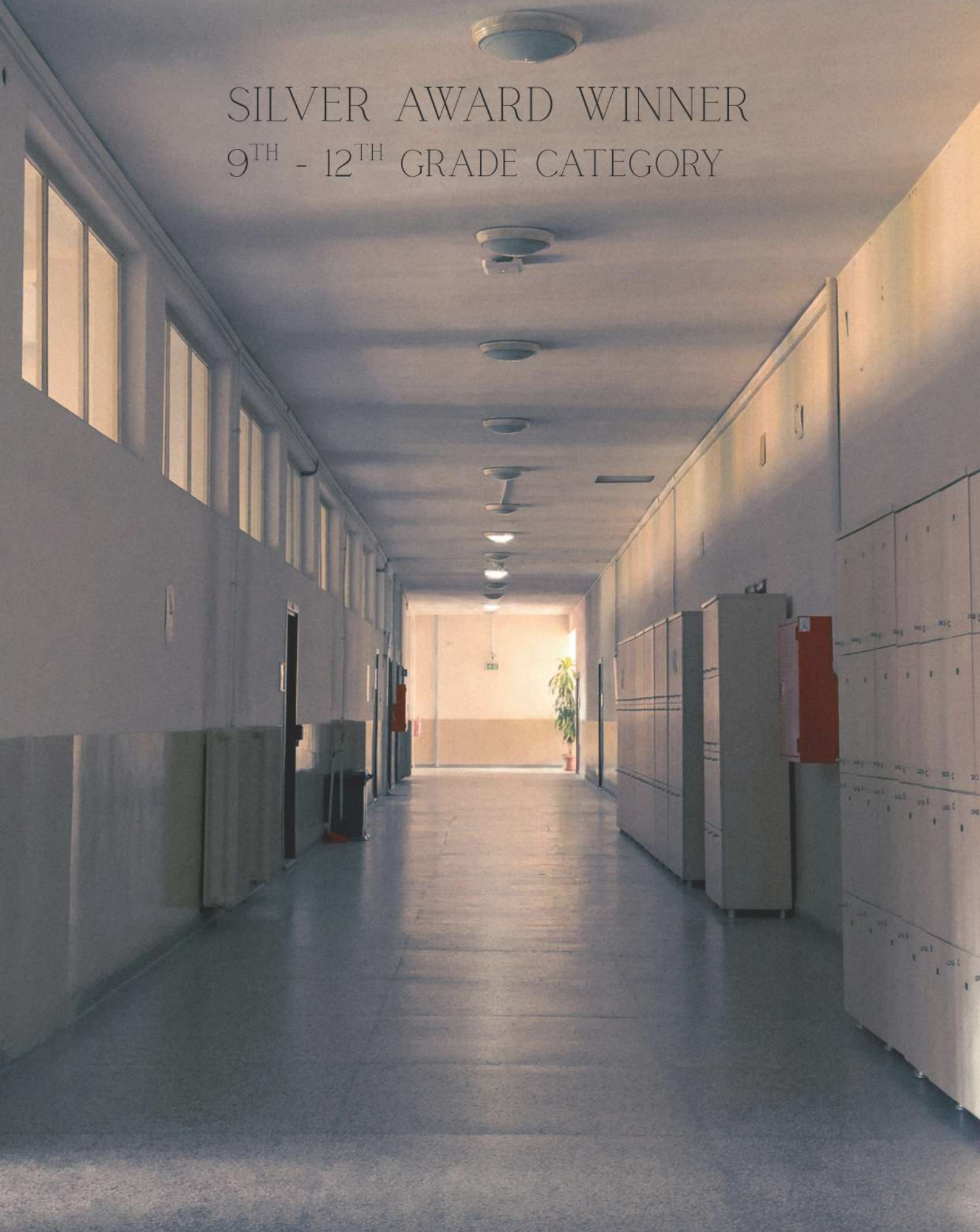
THE DOOR.

MY JOURNEY ISN'T ABOUT HAVING A PERFECT VIEW. IT'S ABOUT THE COURAGE TO KEEP SKATING, MAKING MY MUSIC AND FINDING MY CREATIVE VOICE, EVEN WHEN THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE WORLD IS A SHADOW, TRUSTING THAT THE HEART KNOWS THE WAY, EVEN WHEN THE EYES DO NOT.

I AM A SURVIVOR OF RETINOBLASTOMA, A NATIONAL CHAMPION, AND A PASSIONATE MUSICIAN AND PUBLISHED AUTHOR. BUT MORE THAN THAT, I AM A PERSON WHO HAS FOUND HER UNSEEN EDGE. TODAY, WHEN I FACE A CHALLENGE, I DON'T LOOK FOR THE EASY PATH. I FIND THE PLACE WHERE I HAVE TO WORK HARDER, FEEL MORE DEEPLY, AND MOVE WITH MORE INTENTION. BECAUSE I KNOW THAT ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THAT STRUGGLE ISN'T JUST A GOLD MEDAL; IT'S THE COURAGE OF BECOMING THE PERSON I CAN TRULY BE PROUD TO BECOME.

MICHAEL YAN  
ONE MINUTE ONE ROPE

SILVER AWARD WINNER  
9<sup>TH</sup> - 12<sup>TH</sup> GRADE CATEGORY











An abstract architectural rendering featuring a complex arrangement of rectangular blocks and vertical slatted columns. The scene is set against a gradient background transitioning from a deep blue at the top to a warm orange and red at the bottom. The lighting creates strong shadows and highlights, emphasizing the three-dimensional forms and textures of the materials.

MAGGIE HSU

THE LAST THRESHOLD  
MADE HUMAN. BORN DIVINE.

BRONZE AWARD

WINNER

9<sup>TH</sup> - 12<sup>TH</sup> GRADE

CATEGORY

## VIOLET

I BLINK. AND AGAIN.

NOTHING MAKES SENSE. MY LUNGS STING, MY EARS RINGING, AND FOR A FLEETING SECOND, I WONDER IF I'M DEAD. YET I'M LYING ON GRASS- SOFT, REAL GRASS, SPIKY AND COOL AGAINST MY SKIN.

WOBBLING, I PUSH MYSELF UP, AND GASP.

A VAST VOID STRETCHES IN EVERY DIRECTION, LIT BY A PARADE OF STARS. FLOATING ISLANDS HOVER IN THE DISTANCE, SOME LUSH WITH GREENERY, SOME CRACKED AND JAGGED, OTHERS FADING IN AND OUT LIKE BAD SIGNALS ON A HOLOSCREEN. TINY FRAGMENTS OF ROCK DRIFT BETWEEN THEM, SUSPENDED IN NOTHINGNESS.

IT'S BEAUTIFUL. TERRIFYING. IMPOSSIBLE.

THEN I SEE IT. A TALL, DARK FIGURE GLIDES TOWARDS ME. THE CLOSER HE COMES, THE MORE I SEE: DARK, ALMOST METALLIC ARMOR CATCHING FAINT LIGHTS. HIS FACE IS A DARK, MASK-LIKE STRUCTURE. THE SURFACE LOOKS METALLIC AND SMOOTH, ALMOST ARMOR-LIKE, WITH SHARP, ANGULAR LINES REPLACING NATURAL FEATURES. THERE IS NO VISIBLE LIP OR NOSE, ONLY A SLEEK, SCULPTED FORM TAPERING DOWNWARD. HIS GLOWING EYES SHINE WITH A GOLDEN LIGHT FROM WITHIN DEEP SOCKETS, HOLLOW YET INTENSE.

WHERE AM I? WHO IS THAT?? WHY AM I HERE???

"WH-WHO ARE YOU?" MY VOICE CRACKS AND ECHOS IN THE VOID.

I FEEL THE WEIGHT OF HIS GAZE; GOLDEN EYES BORING INTO ME.

“WHY ARE YOU HERE?” HIS VOICE IS LOW, WITH A HINT OF AMUSEMENT.

“I-I DON’T KNOW! I FELL,” I BLURT. “I WAS ON A BUS THEN TOUCHED A MIRROR LIKE LIQUID. SUDDENLY I’M CRUSHED, NOW I’M—”

“YOU FELL,” HE INTERRUPTS, VOICE FLAT. “YOU CROSSED A THRESHOLD. YOU SHOULDN’T EXIST HERE.”

“I-WHAT? WHERE AM I? WHAT IS THE THRESHOLD?”

HE GLIDES CLOSER, THE AIR VIBRATING. “PORTALS CONNECTING YOUR WORLD TO MINE, AETHERFALL. A FRACTURED REALM BETWEEN REALITIES. EACH ISLAND YOU SEE IS A FRAGMENT OF A DIFFERENT WORLD,” POINTING TOWARDS SILENT LANDMASSES DRIFTING BETWEEN EXISTENCE AND NOTHINGNESS. “SOME FADE, AND SOME COLLAPSE. YOU ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO HAVE CROSSED THE VEIL.”

I SWALLOW HARD. “SO...WHY AM I HERE?”

HIS MASK-LIKE FACE GIVES NOTHING AWAY.

“PERHAPS AETHERFALL CHOSE YOU. OR PERHAPS YOU WERE LUCKY. ONLY TIME WILL TELL.” ABOVE US, THE STARS FLICKER, ONE BY ONE DIMMING, THEN FLARING WEAKLY BACK TO LIFE. “AETHERFALL IS DYING. FRACTURES ARE APPEARING MORE FREQUENTLY AND ENTIRE REALITIES ARE AT RISK.”

I BREATHE, FINGERS BRUSHING THE GRASS. IT FEELS ALIVE. A NEARBY FRAGMENT SHUDDERS VIOLENTLY, ITS EDGES BREAKING INTO SHARDS OF LIGHT. I REACH FOR IT WITHOUT THINKING. THE MOMENT MY SKIN MEETS STONE, SOMETHING FLOWS OUTWARD—

NOT FROM THE ROCK, BUT FROM ME. THE FLICKER SLOWS AS CRACKS GLOW WHITE-GOLD, SEALING ONE BY ONE. THE AIR STOPS TREMBLING. THE FRAGMENT SETTLES INTO STILLNESS, HEAVY AND STAGNANT BENEATH MY HAND.

STARING AT ME, HE ASKS, "WHAT IS YOUR NAME?"

"VIOLET."

"YOU ARE A VEILBORN," HE SAYS QUIETLY.

I STARE. "A WHAT?"

"A LIVING PARADOX. THE SEAMSTRESS ONCE STITCHED ALL REALITIES TOGETHER WHEN THE FRACTURES BEGAN TO UNRAVEL. LEGEND SAYS SHE SEALED HERSELF BEYOND THE FINAL THRESHOLD. ONLY SOMEONE LIKE YOU CAN REACH HER. THAT IS WHY I AM HERE, TO ESCORT YOU."

"AND WHO ARE YOU?" I ASK, STILL STARING.

"I AM KAELITH, CARTOGRAPHER OF RUINS, GUARDIAN OF LOST FRAGMENTS," HE ECHOS. "IT IS MY DUTY TO BRING YOU SAFELY TO THE CORE. COME. IF YOU INTEND TO SURVIVE, FOLLOW ME."

LIMBS CLUMSY, I NOD AND STEP TOWARDS HIM, TOWARDS THE VOID, TOWARDS WHATEVER THIS WORLD EXPECTS OF ME.

KAELITH

INTERESTING.

MOST WHO FALL THROUGH THE VEIL BREAK OR VANISH INTO

NOTHINGNESS. SHE DOES NEITHER. I SAW THE FRAGMENT STEADY BENEATH HER, A FAINT PULSE RADIATING FROM HER PRESENCE.

“STAY CLOSE,” I COMMAND AS WE MOVE ACROSS THE NEAREST FRAGMENT. BEYOND IT, OTHER ISLANDS DRIFT LIKE BROKEN TEETH, SOME FADING MIDAIR, OTHERS FLICKERING AS THOUGH CAUGHT BETWEEN WORLDS. THE VOID HUMS BENEATH US, LOW AND CONSTANT, WHISPERING AT THE EDGES OF PERCEPTION. FEW MORTALS HEAR IT. VERY FEW SURVIVE IT.

“WHY ARE SOME ISLANDS FADING?” VIOLET ASKS, CURIOUS.

“THEY ARE FRAGMENTS OF WORLDS UNMADE,” I ANSWER.

“WITHOUT THE CORE, ALL WILL BE LOST. THAT IS WHY I AM BRINGING YOU.”

WE CONTINUE, LEAPING FROM FRAGMENT TO FRAGMENT. SOME CRUMBLE UNDERFOOT; SMALL PIECES TUMBLE INTO THE VOID BELOW.

THE CORE COMES INTO VIEW: A COLOSSAL STRUCTURE HOVERING ABOVE THE LARGEST ISLAND, CRYSTALLINE AND IMPOSSIBLY SMOOTH, VEINS OF LIGHT WEAVING ACROSS ITS SURFACE. ITS EMANATING ENERGY VIBRATES THROUGH THE FRAGMENTS, RESONATING IN MY ARMOR AND IN HER PULSE.

“DO NOT BE DISTRACTED,” I SAY, THOUGH WITH SOME APPROVAL. SHE IS CURIOUS; THAT WILL SERVE HER WELL.

I EXTEND MY HAND. “STEP FORWARD. THE CORE WILL DECIDE WHAT YOU MAY BECOME, BUT FIRST, YOU MUST ENTER.”

## VIOLET

THE CORE SWIRLS AROUND ME. IT'S A PULSE OF LIGHT AND ENERGY, VEINS OF WHITE GOLD RUNNING THROUGH AN IMPOSSIBLY SMOOTH SURFACE. EVERY STEP I TAKE SENDS RIPPLES THROUGH THE AIR, AS IF THE WORLD ITSELF IS BREATHING.

KAELITH'S VOICE CUTS THROUGH THE HUM. "CAREFUL. THE CORE IS ALIVE. IT WILL RESPOND TO YOU."

I GLANCE DOWN AT MY HANDS. A JAGGED FRAGMENT I TOUCHED OUTSIDE THE CORE HOVERS IN MY MIND—HOW IT HAD STABILIZED UNDER MY FINGERTIPS, OBEDIENT TO THEM.

I TAKE A SHAKY STEP FORWARD. THE CORE PULSES AROUND ME, VEINS OF LIGHT SHIFTING, AS IF THEY'RE ALIVE, BREATHING. I FEEL THE INSTABILITY, THE PIECES SHATTERED AND FLOATING IN MIDAIR, QUIVERING. MY STOMACH TWISTS. THIS PLACE IS MAGNIFICENT YET TERRIFYING, ITS POWER HUMS UNDER MY SKIN.

"EVERY FRAGMENT HERE IS A WORLD UNMADE." HE RETRACES. "YOU ARE NOT HERE TO OBSERVE. YOU ARE HERE TO STABILIZE, TO MEND, TO ENDURE."

I PRESS A HAND TO THE NEAREST SHARD OF CRYSTAL. IT TREMBLES. STRETCHING MY FINGERS, I WATCH IT STEADY, AS IF RECOGNIZING ME. MY PULSE THROBS IN TIME WITH THE LIGHT. SUDDENLY, I REMEMBER.

## VIOLET

I AM THE SEAMSTRESS.

AETHERFALL WAS COLLAPSING CENTURIES AGO. THE ORIGINAL SEAMSTRESS SPLIT HERSELF IN TWO TO PREVENT TOTAL DESTRUCTION. ONE HALF STAYED BEHIND, HOLDING AETHERFALL TOGETHER. THE OTHER HALF WAS SENT TO ANOTHER WORLD. TO GROW. TO LIVE. TO BECOME HUMAN. TO LEARN EMPATHY, MEMORY, AND LOVE.

THAT HALF IS ME.

ALL THESE YEARS, THE STRANGE PULL, THE VEIL BETWEEN WORLDS LED ME HERE; TO THIS CORE, TO THIS MOMENT. I AM THE CORE.

THIS WORLD HAS BEEN SLOWLY COLLAPSING AS IT CAN NO LONGER SUSTAIN ITSELF WITHOUT ME WHOLE. THE INSTABILITY, THE FADING ISLANDS, THE GLITCHING FRAGMENTS...IT WAS MY ABSENCE SCREAMING THROUGH THE VOID.

I MUST RECONNECT WITH THE OTHER HALF.

I CLOSE MY EYES, FEELING THE WEIGHT OF WHAT THAT MEANS. I WILL REMEMBER EVERYTHING: EVERY STITCH I EVER MADE, EVERY WORLD I EVER HELD TOGETHER... EVERY JOY, EVERY LOSS.

BUT I WOULD NO LONGER BE HUMAN. NO MORE PROWLING ON AMBER STREET. NO MORE STEALING.

THE CORE HUMS AROUND ME, VEINS OF LIGHT PULSING LIKE A HEARTBEAT. AETHERFALL WAITS.

I AM THE SEAMSTRESS. I HAVE WORK TO DO.

## KAELITH

I WATCH AS THE CORE'S LIGHT SPREADS, THREADS OF REALITY  
KNITTING TOGETHER. ISLANDS SOLIDIFY, NEW WORLDS  
STABILIZING AROUND THEM. THE VOID HUMS WITH A CALM I  
HAVEN'T FELT IN CENTURIES.

SHE WILL BE GONE. AETHERFALL BREATHES AGAIN, WHOLE, HELD  
STEADY BY THE OTHER HALF OF THE SEAMSTRESS.

I STEP BACK, SHADOWS CURLING OVER THE FRAGMENTS BENEATH  
ME. SHE SAVED EVERYTHING. EVEN WITHOUT HER HERE, I KNOW  
THIS REALM IS AT PEACE. FOR NOW.

ELENA JI

ELEANOR'S CLOCK

TOP SUBMISSION

7<sup>TH</sup> - 8<sup>TH</sup> GRADE CATEGORY



ELEANOR WHITMAN WAS TWELVE WHEN SHE FIRST IMAGINED IT: A CLOCK THAT DIDN'T JUST MEASURE TIME, BUT BORROWED IT.

SHE HAD BEEN SITTING ON THE ATTIC FLOOR OF HER FAMILY'S NARROW BRICK HOUSE, DUST DRIFTING LAZILY THROUGH THIN BEAMS OF AFTERNOON SUNLIGHT. AROUND HER LAY THE FORGOTTEN RELICS OF GENERATIONS—CRACKED PICTURE FRAMES, TARNISHED CANDLESTICKS, A VIOLIN WITH BROKEN STRINGS. BUT IT WAS THE SMALL PILE OF DISCARDED WATCH PARTS IN A WOODEN BOX THAT CAUGHT HER ATTENTION. GEARS, SPRINGS, TINY SCREWS NO BIGGER THAN FRECKLES. SHE TURNED ONE BETWEEN HER FINGERS AND WONDERED WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF TIME ITSELF WERE SOMETHING YOU COULD WIND, LIKE A TOY.

IT LOOKED ORDINARY WHEN SHE FINISHED—BRASS GEARS, POLISHED WALNUT CASING, A DELICATE SILVER FACE ETCHED WITH SLENDER ROMAN NUMERALS—BUT INSIDE, IT DID SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY. TURN THE HANDS BACKWARD, AND THE MACHINE COULD REWIND THE MOMENTS IT TOUCHED. A DROPPED TEACUP WOULD LIFT FROM SHARDS TO WHOLE; A SPILLED INK BOTTLE WOULD CLIMB OBEDIENTLY BACK INTO ITS GLASS PRISON; A HURTFUL WORD COULD VANISH BEFORE IT EVER REACHED THE AIR.

SHE TESTED IT CAUTIOUSLY AT FIRST. A CRACKED PORCELAIN DOLL RESTORED ITS PAINTED SMILE. WILTED FLOWERS IN THE GARDEN STRAIGHTENED AND BRIGHTENED, PETALS SMOOTHING AS IF SLEEP HAD REFRESHED THEM. EVEN THE STUBBORN GARDEN GATE, WHICH GROANED LIKE AN OLD MAN EVERY TIME IT OPENED, SWUNG SILENTLY AGAIN. EACH TIME SHE USED THE CLOCK, IT HUMMED SOFTLY—WARM AND STEADY IN HER PALMS, AS IF GRATEFUL FOR PURPOSE.

BUT CURIOSITY, AS IT OFTEN DOES, STRETCHED BEYOND CAUTION.

ONE EVENING, AFTER SHOUTING AT HER MOTHER IN A FIT OF FRUSTRATION—WORDS SHARP AND LOUDER THAN SHE MEANT—ELEANOR LAY AWAKE WITH REGRET PRESSING HEAVILY AGAINST HER CHEST. BEFORE DAWN, SHE CREPT TO THE ATTIC. HANDS TREMBLING, SHE TURNED THE CLOCK BACKWARD.

THE DAY UNWOUND LIKE THREAD PULLED FROM FABRIC. THE ARGUMENT DISSOLVED. HER MOTHER STOOD IN THE KITCHEN AGAIN, UNTOUCHED BY HURT. THIS TIME, ELEANOR CHOSE SILENCE INSTEAD OF ANGER.

RELIEF COURSED THROUGH HER. IT FELT MIRACULOUS.

WORD SPREAD SLOWLY, LIKE FOG ROLLING ACROSS FIELDS. A FRIEND WHOSE PRIZED LOCKET HAD FALLEN INTO THE RIVER. A NEIGHBOR WHO WISHED TO TAKE BACK CRUEL GOSSIP. SOON, WHISPERS TRAVELED FASTER THAN ELEANOR COULD QUIET THEM. PEOPLE BEGAN APPEARING AT HER DOOR, HATS CLUTCHED NERVOUSLY IN HAND.

AT FIRST, SHE HELPED ONLY WHEN SHE BELIEVED IT MATTERED. THEN SHE HELPED BECAUSE IT WAS EASIER THAN REFUSING.

BEFORE LONG, THE TOWN LEANED ON HER INVENTION AS IF IT WERE A CRUTCH. CHILDREN RAN RECKLESSLY ACROSS COBBLESTONE STREETS. SHOPKEEPERS GREW CARELESS WITH THEIR SUMS. APOLOGIES BECAME RARE, FOR WHY APOLOGIZE WHEN MISTAKES COULD BE ERASED? ARGUMENTS WERE UNDONE BEFORE LESSONS WERE LEARNED.

BUT THE CLOCK HAD A PRICE.

TIME BORROWED DID NOT VANISH WITHOUT CONSEQUENCE. FLOWERS THAT BLOOMED AGAIN TOOK LONGER TO GROW THE NEXT SEASON. WINTERS LINGERED STRANGELY. ELEANOR FOUND ENTIRE AFTERNOONS MISSING FROM HER MEMORY, LIKE PAGES TORN FROM A BOOK SHE HAD ONCE READ. FACES BLURRED. LAUGHTER ECHOED WITHOUT CONTEXT. THE MORE SHE REWOUND, THE MORE SOMETHING INVISIBLE THINNED.

THE HUMMING OF THE CLOCK CHANGED TOO. WHAT HAD ONCE SOUNDED CONTENT NOW TREMBLED FAINTLY, LIKE A TIRED BREATH.

ONE MORNING, ELEANOR WOKE TO AN UNNATURAL SILENCE.

THE RIVER BEYOND HER WINDOW STOOD STILL, ITS SURFACE SMOOTH AS GLASS. BIRDS HUNG MOTIONLESS IN THE PALE SKY. THE SUN LINGERED AT THE HORIZON, NEITHER RISING NOR SETTING. EVEN THE WIND SEEMED PAUSED MID-THOUGHT.

HER HEART POUNDED AS SHE REALIZED THE TRUTH: SHE HAD REWOUND TOO MANY DAYS. BORROWED TOO MUCH TIME. THE WORLD ITSELF STRAINED BENEATH THE WEIGHT OF TOO MANY "PERFECT" CORRECTIONS.

DESPERATE, SHE CLIMBED TO THE ATTIC AND GRASPED THE CLOCK ONE FINAL TIME. INSTEAD OF TURNING THE HANDS BACK, SHE PUSHED THEM FORWARD.

TIME SNAPPED VIOLENTLY.

DAYS COLLAPSED INTO SECONDS. LEAVES BURST FROM BRANCHES AND FELL AGAIN. BUILDINGS WEATHERED AND BRIGHTENED IN DIZZYING SUCCESSION. ELEANOR FELL TO HER KNEES AS MONTHS

AND YEARS RUSHED PAST HER SENSES LIKE A STORM.

THEN—STILLNESS RETURNED.

THE RIVER FLOWED ONCE MORE. THE SUN CLIMBED PROPERLY INTO THE SKY. BIRDS RESUMED THEIR FLIGHT.

PEOPLE AWOKE CONFUSED, THEIR MEMORIES TANGLED AND UNEVEN. SOME REJOICED AT THE RETURN OF ORDINARY DAYS. OTHERS WEPT, FEELING LOSSES THEY COULD NOT FULLY EXPLAIN. NOTHING WAS FLAWLESS ANYMORE. ARGUMENTS LEFT MARKS. ACCIDENTS CARRIED CONSEQUENCES. APOLOGIES BECAME NECESSARY AGAIN.

ELEANOR DISMANTLED THE CLOCK PIECE BY PIECE. SHE BURIED ITS BRASS GEARS AND SILVER FACE BENEATH THE ROOTS OF THE OLDEST OAK IN THE FOREST, WHERE THE EARTH WAS DEEP AND STEADY.

THAT EVENING, HER MOTHER FOUND HER SITTING QUIETLY AT THE KITCHEN TABLE.

“WE CAN’T LIVE BY UNDOING MISTAKES,” HER MOTHER SAID GENTLY, UNAWARE OF HOW LITERAL THOSE WORDS WERE. “WE LIVE BY LEARNING FROM THEM.”

YEARS LATER, ELEANOR WALKED PAST THE OAK TREE, ITS BRANCHES STRETCHING WIDE AND STRONG. SHE SMILED SOFTLY.

THE CLOCK WAS GONE.

THE WORLD WAS MESSY. IMPERFECT. UNPREDICTABLE.

AND EXACTLY AS IT SHOULD BE.

