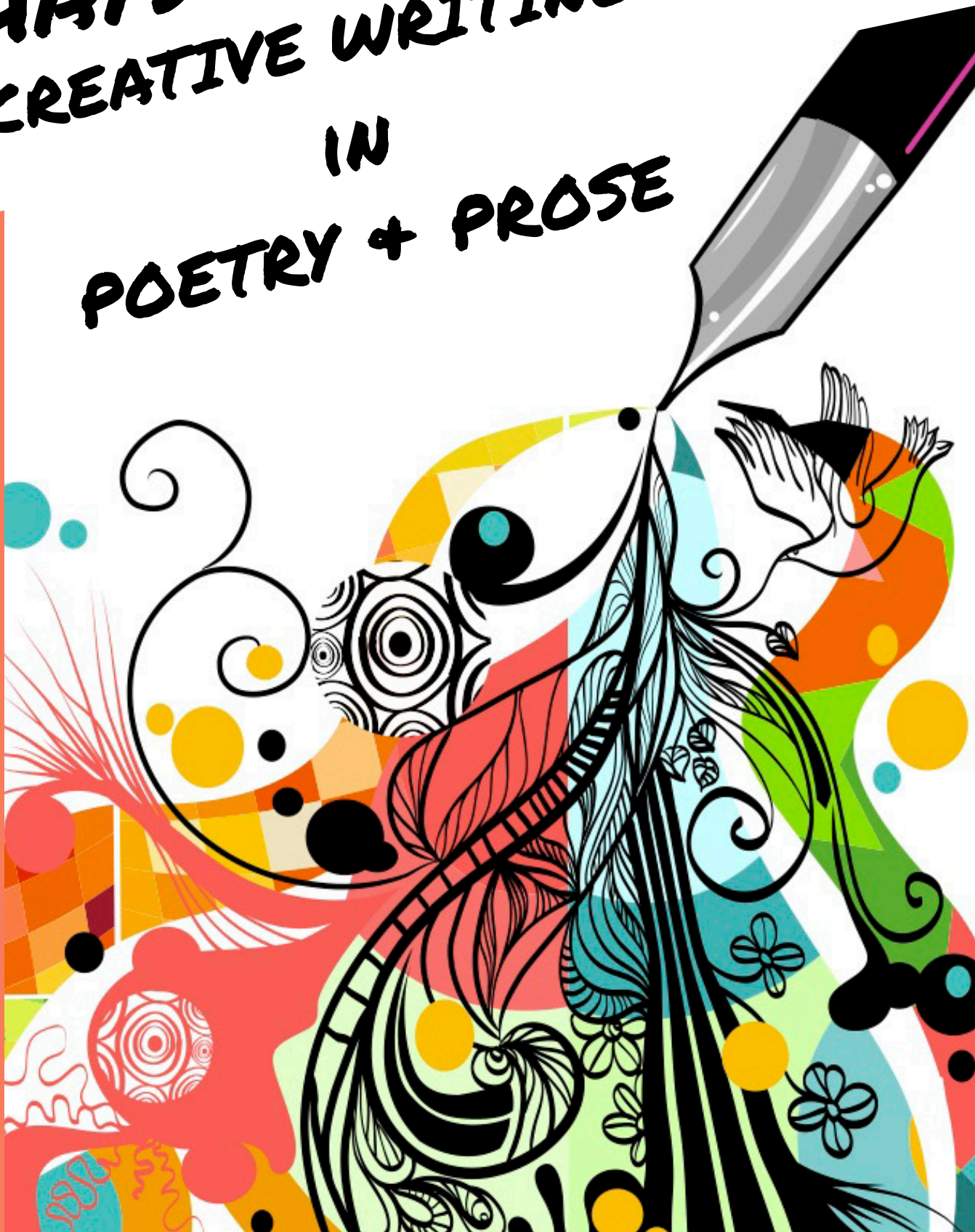


HAYS ARTS COUNCIL CREATIVE WRITING AWARDS

IN
POETRY + PROSE



SPRING 2026



THE HAYS ARTS COUNCIL CREATIVE WRITING AWARDS IN POETRY AND PROSE ~ 2026

Dear Everyone,

I was honored to serve as judge for the K-12 Hays Arts Council Creative Writing Contest again this year and to serve as the chairperson in the Fort Hays State University English Department. Once again, the quality of writing in the entries submitted continues to astonish me. I think I can speak for all judges when I say that all of the entries were a joy to read again this year. All the young writers who created work for this contest have met the challenge of providing enthusiasm and quality in their work.

My grateful thanks to everyone who took the time to be a part of this amazing writing opportunity. Thank you to the students who made the effort to submit their prose and poetry this year. To the teachers who supported the dreams of these young students, you have my gratitude and praise—that support is vital to sustain the integrity and creativity of this contest. You should all be proud of your efforts and your students.

Additionally, my utmost thanks go out to the following colleagues for taking the time to help judge the entries: Dr. Amanda Stinemetz, Dr. Perry Harrison, Dr. Cheryl Duffy, Linda McHenry, Dr. Brett Weaver, Dr. Allison Bannister, Dr. Lexey Bartlett, Dr. Eric Leuschner, and Dr. Sharla Hutchison. Also, a special thank you is ALWAYS due to Brenda Meder for her extensive work and for keeping everything running so smoothly every year.

Writer Charles de Lint once remarked, "No one else sees the world the way you do, so no one else can tell the stories that you have to tell." Let us all continue to foster storytelling in young writers. Please enjoy the numerous creative pieces collected here. Keep writing!

Sincerely,

Morgan Chalfant, MA
Fort Hays State University, Department of English
Creative Writing Judging Committee Chair

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Jo Ann Jennings
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and friend of the
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City of Hays and the State of Kansas through
the Kansas Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts

2026 Creative Writing Awards ~ Poetry

<i>Gr.</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Title of Work</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Teacher</i>
K	1st	Jentry Dinkel	<i>Dog</i>	St. Mary's	Shelby Trickle
K	2nd	Layton Bittel	<i>Dinosaur</i>	St. Mary's	Shelby Trickle
K	3rd	Avery Gottschalk	<i>Fox</i>	St. Mary's	Shelby Trickle
K	HM	Brynlee Honas	<i>Cat</i>	St. Mary's	Shelby Trickle
1	1st	Clara Serpan	<i>Magical Things I Love</i>	St. Mary's	Karla Bennett
1	2nd	Addisyn Nilhas	<i>ADDISYN</i>	St. Mary's	Karla Bennett
1	3rd	Copelan Kennedy	<i>Spring</i>	Wilson	Jessica Lang
1	HM	Mason Mattheyer	<i>Dogs, Cousins, and Fun</i>	St. Mary's	Karla Bennett
2	1st (t)	Baylor Ruder	<i>The Secret Life of Roly Polies</i>	Wilson	Kenda Leiker
2	1st (t)	Lyla Fox	<i>Cool Bugs</i>	Holy Family	Cristy Dinkel
2	2nd	Lyla Fox	<i>Spring</i>	Holy Family	Cristy Dinkel
2	3rd	John Hilger	<i>Wheat</i>	Holy Family	Cristy Dinkel
2	HM	Wally Wichert	<i>Hot Wheels</i>	Washington	Clara North
3	1st	Johanna Jacques	<i>Spring</i>	Washington	Jessica Russell
3	2nd	Cohen Baczkowski	<i>Bengal Tiger</i>	Wilson	Leslie Karlin
3	3rd	Karlyn Acosta	<i>Nature</i>	Wilson	Leslie Karlin
3	HM	Breckyn Preisner	<i>Butterfly</i>	Wilson	Leslie Karlin
4	1st	Ian Madrigal	<i>Dragonfly</i>	Holy Family	Jenny Howard
4	2nd	John Dinkel	<i>Football</i>	St. Mary's	Kyleigh Allen
4	3rd (t)	Minden Pfannenstiel	<i>Bills</i>	Holy Family	Kallyn DeWitt
4	3rd (t)	Gideon Tillman	<i>The Adventure</i>	Roosevelt	Hannah Wince
4	3rd (t)	Oliver Adcock-Smies	<i>Autumn</i>	O'Loughlin	Hannah Wince
4	HM	Dean Hickert	<i>February</i>	St. Mary's	Kyleigh Allen
4	HM	Hadley Gifford	<i>Spiders</i>	Holy Family	Kallyn DeWitt
5	1st	Brielle Honas	<i>Summer Time</i>	St. Mary's	Katie Brungardt
5	2nd	Dayvon Ruffus	<i>Ode to Fire Alarms</i>	Victoria	Hannah Wince
5	3rd	Ainsley Haas	<i>Volleyball</i>	St. Mary's	Katie Brungardt
5	HM	Dayvon Ruffus	<i>The Young Boy</i>	Victoria	Hannah Wince
6	1st	Faith Balandran	<i>Sweet Peace</i>	HMS	Sydney Niernberger
6	2nd	Annie Hertel	<i>Squeeze Me Tight!</i>	TMP-M JH	Conor Nicholl
6	3rd	Clara Still	<i>The Snyderwhip</i>	Washington	Amy Kuppetz
6	HM	Theodore Meagher	<i>No Beginning, No End</i>	Washington	Amy Kuppetz
6	HM	Jade Whitmer	<i>Letting Go</i>	TMP-M JH	Conor Nicholl

<i>Gr.</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Title of Work</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Teacher</i>
7	1st	Kalliape Butler	<i>When Love Found Me</i>	HMS	Amy Schmidt
7	2nd	Gianna Ochoa	<i>The People I Used to Know</i>	TMP-M JH	Conor Nicholl
7	3rd	Harper Nicholl	<i>Because We Grew Up</i>	TMP-M JH	Conor Nicholl
7	HM	Mila Womack	<i>Human</i>	HMS	Megan Pantle
7	HM	Ryleigh Kuehl	<i>Earth's Children</i>	HMS	Megan Pantle
8	1st	Brecken Kennedy	<i>Howling Whisper</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
8	2nd	Arianna Cantrell-Diaz	<i>Beyond the Skin</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
8	3rd	Isabella Anderson	<i>The Soundproof Room</i>	HMS	Meagan Englert
8	HM	Keaton Gottwald	<i>The Blind Man</i>	Victoria JH	Mary Mills
8	HM	Myka Schoepf	<i>Am I Pretty Yet?</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
8	HM	Dalton Herrman	<i>The Clock</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
9	1st	Katelyn Haddock	<i>The Roller Coaster</i>	Victoria High	Mary Mills
9	2nd	Kennedy Orr	<i>Strength</i>	Victoria High	Mary Mills
9	3rd	Emmit Stoffel	<i>Stare</i>	Victoria High	Mary Mills
10	1st	An Li	<i>Simple Pleasures</i>	Hays High	Jessica Clingan
11	1st	Macie Herman	<i>Tattered Pantyhose</i>	Hays High	Maleigha Albers
11	2nd	Amos Buller	<i>Checkmate</i>	Hays High	Dave Buller
11	3rd	Brooklynn Koerner	<i>The Perfect Day</i>	Hays High	Maleigha Albers

2026 Creative Writing Winning Entries ~ *Poetry*

Dog

Dog
Wag, run, walk, eat,
play, sleep

Jentry Dinkel

St. Mary's Grade School
Kindergarten, 1st Place

Dinosaur

Dinosaur
T-rex, different colors,
eats meat, sharp teeth

Layton Bittel

St. Mary's Grade School
Kindergarten, 2nd Place

Magical Things I Love

I love my magic cauldron named Lolo
I love seeing my things I wish could happen
I love eating ice cream sundaes with a unicorn on it
I love playing at the park
I love reading because I see many adventures
I love to listen to the birds in spring
I love when my dad tickles me and pretends to wrestle

Clara Serpan

St. Mary's Grade School
1st Grade, 1st Place

Fox

Fox
Eat, drink, run, hunt
tail, eyes, ears

Avery Gottschalk

St. Mary's Grade School
Kindergarten, 3rd Place

Cat

Cat
Tail, food, water,
grass, paws

Brynlee Honas

St. Mary's Grade School
Kindergarten, Honorable Mention

ADDISYN

Activities are fun
Dogs are cute
Do new things
I like to do makeup for people
Share with friends
Yellow is my favorite color
Night time is pretty

Addisyn Nilhas

St. Mary's Grade School
1st Grade, 2nd Place

Spring

Sunny day.
Play outside.
Rainy day.
I spy a rainbow.
Nice garden.
Go to the park.

Copelan Kennedy
Wilson Elementary School
1st Grade, 3rd Place

Dogs, Cousins, and Fun

I love my dogs
I love seeing my cousins
I love eating spaghetti
I love playing line tag
I love reading at the library
I love to play
I love when my dogs play

Mason Mattheyer
St. Mary's Grade School
1st Grade, Honorable Mention

The Secret Life of Roly Polies

Roly Polies are little, tiny crustaceans
With huge populations.
Don't worry they are not a threat,
If you make it a habitat, you can have one as a pet.
Night is when a roly poly comes out to eat,
Decomposing leaves, mulch, and plants as their treat.
Using their exoskeleton to roll up into a ball,
Protecting themselves from a close call.
Roly polies have a bunch of fun,
Hiding down deep from the sun.

Baylor Ruder
Wilson Elementary School
2nd Grade, 1st Place (tie)

Cool Bugs

Butterflies flutter
near roses and lilies
while smooth-skinned frogs
hatch baby tadpoles.
Ladybugs fly around
in black-dotted coats,
and busy spiders spin webs
trapping tasty flies

Lyla Fox
Holy Family Elementary
2nd Grade, 1st Place (tie)

Spring

Spring grass flows
In the breeze
As soft, white, fluffy clouds
Follow the bright, shiny sun.
Flowers leave blooming scents
In spring's air.
Colorful, chirping birds
Sing beautiful songs,
And hibernating animals
Are ready for spring.

Lyla Fox
Holy Family Elementary
2nd Grade, 2nd Place

Bengal Tiger

As you go in the jungle
Whoosh! Creak! Stomp!
You see orange, black, and white animals all around
You follow the tracks you see...
Sharp claws, sharp teeth animal with orange, black and white
Don't go near the Bengal Tiger.

Cohen Baczkowski
Wilson Elementary School
3rd Grade, 2nd Place

Wheat

Bright golden fields
glow with wheat
rocking back and forth
as the gentlest winds blow.

John Hilger
Holy Family Elementary
2nd Grade, 3rd Place

Nature

In a forest bright and green
The prettiest place I've ever seen
Tall trees stretch up in the sky
Waving leafy hands up high

Busy ants march in a line
Working hard so they can feel fine
Butterflies with painted wings
Dancing around like living things

Rivers humming as they flow
Splashing water down below
Fish and silver shiny scales
With some tails

Clouds float by like soft cotton
And sometimes may look rotten
While the sun is light
Just as bright

Karlyn Acosta
Wilson Elementary School
3rd Grade, 3rd Place

Hot Wheels

Hot wheels
How fast they go!
Oval tracks
The wheels are fast
Will race till broken
Hunting packs
Easy to build tracks
Every car is different
Love to race

Wally Wichert
Washington Grade School
2nd Grade, Honorable Mention

Spring

Pretty flowers blow in the wind
Juicy watermelon squeezes in my mouth
Strong candles burn through the house
Fast swings go through the park
Blue skies stretch across the horizon
Bright sun sets after a long day
Graceful butterflies fly in the sky
Green grass grows around every house
Approaching spring brings smiles all around

Johanna Jacques
Washington Grade School
3rd Grade, 1st Place

Butterfly

Flip flap sip sap
Beautiful wings find the sky
Drinking pollen from those flowers
Beautiful wings are so shiny
They sky and his followers will keep his creatures alive
The creature flies through the sky
The flapping sparkly blue with those in the sky
The flowers and that's what keeps butterflies alive

Breckyn Preisner
Wilson Elementary School
3rd Grade, Honorable Mention

Dragonfly

An ancient-like bug
Four silvery, gold wings
Lives near ponds
Sometimes migrates
Very long emerald tail
Attacks its prey
Jeweled eyes looking for its next meal

Ian Madrigal

Holy Family Elementary School
4th Grade, 1st Place

Football

Flag on the play
Oval
Oregon ducks
Teamwork
Bowling touchdown dance
August is the time for pre-season
Laps at practice
Linemen block

John Dinkel

St. Mary's Grade School
4th Grade, 2nd Place

Bills

There once was a guy named Bob;
he turned on the water knob.
It turned on the hose,
and the water bill rose
which made the poor man sob.

Minden Pfannenstiel

Holy Family Elementary School
4th Grade, 3rd Place (tie)

The Adventure

Blue sky white goose
I like red the goose said
Let's go, go, go
On my big bike
The colors are red and black
That's why I like hiking and biking

Gideon Tillman

Roosevelt Elementary School
4th Grade, 3rd Place (tie)

Spiders

Sneaky,
Prowling,
Idling in the hall.
Down the drain,
Eating bugs,
Rising from carpets.
Spiders, spiders, spiders!

Hadley Gifford

Holy Family Elementary School
4th Grade, Honorable Mention

Autumn

The morning dew as in the grass
The wind was faint
The trees were losing leaves
Yet the children still played carelessly in the autumn conditions

Oliver Adcock-Smies
O'Loughlin Elementary School
4th Grade, 3rd Place (tie)

February

Football
Eeros
Bubble gum day
Reading letters
U.S.A. presidents
Arrows of cupid
Red hearts
Yay it's my birthday month

Dean Hickert
St. Mary's Grade School
4th Grade, Honorable Mention

Summer Time

The sun is out.
The birds are singing.
Cars are flying by.
You're outside playing hide and seek.
Stay hydrated is all you need.
Flowers are flailing off the trees.
You're catching butterflies in the air.
You're jumping around without a care.
It's summertime and we're enjoying the life of the summertime

Brielle Honas
St. Mary's Grade School
5th Grade, 1st Place

Ode to Fire Alarms

Oh fire alarms
You're a double-edged sword
For when you go off it keeps us safe
Even though after it feels like there's a hemorrhage in my brain
Oh fire alarms
A double-edged sword

Dayvon Ruffus
Victoria Elementary School
5th Grade, 2nd Place

The Young Boy

There is a boy out of nowhere
He's nice and has straight hair
He's giving me a rose out of kindness
For his world is dark and the rose is all he has
He wants to exit the chilling void that besieged him
For through anger, uncertainty, and war comes peace, love, and certainty.

Dayvon Ruffus
Victoria Elementary School
5th Grade, Honorable Mention

Volleyball

It's the match point.
I'm serving.
If I don't make it over the net we lose.
It's the championship.
I'm walking back to serve.
My teammate gives me the ball.
I'm getting ready.
Then I hear the ref's whistle blow.
I throw up the ball.
I hit it as hard as I can.
It makes it over.
I ran to my spot.
They get the ball.
They hit it over the net.
We got the ball and I set it to my teammate.
She got it and she spiked it as hard as she could.
It hits the ground, we won.

Ainsley Haas

St. Mary's Grade School
5th Grade, 3rd Place

Sweet Peace

The morning light pours golden through the glass,
Awakening the shadows on the floor.
I watch the silent, lazy moments pass,
And feel my heart expand a little more.
A teacup warms my hands with gentle heat,
The world outside is humming soft and slow.
There's nothing urgent, everything is sweet,
Just watching sunlight make the garden glow.
The air is fresh, the worries feel so far,
A quiet, simple joy begins to bloom.
I'm grateful for exactly where we are,
And peace arrives to fill the sunny room.
This quiet, perfect peace feels wholly mine,
A golden hour, simple and divine.

Faith Balandran

Hays Middle School
6th Grade, 1st Place

Squeeze Me Tight!

It's 2026 and I'm rotting in my bed thinking about everything
I roll and I stretch but I can't sleep no matter how hard I try
I sit up and yawn
A pink teddy bear catches my eye
I grab it and press the button in the middle
I hear my dad's voice come through little sound box
"Hi honey!
I love you!
Squeeze me tight!
Oh!
Oh!
Have a good night sweetie!"
I hear that and suddenly it's 2019 in Texas
I'm four years old building a pink Build-A-Bear with a princess dress
We're getting the voice recording and my mom's about to speak into it
until my dad decides he wants to
He says that phrase and little me was enraged
I wanted my mom to say it
Not him
Suddenly I'm brought back into the present by the feeling of a tear sprinting down my cheek
Now I couldn't be more grateful for this little gift
A sweet reminder of when our family was all together
Happily.

Annie Hertel

Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High
6th Grade, 2nd Place

Letting Go

Trying to feel it
Trying to notice it
Trying to let things go

Hoping for a light
Hoping for a person
Hoping for someone to help me let go

Thinking about you
Thinking about everything else
Thinking about letting go

Saying I'm okay
Saying I'll think about it
Saying I'll let it go

Knowing I'll be able to make it
Knowing I can stay by you
Knowing I'll have to let it go

Understanding I can't control it
Understanding I'll need to help it
Understanding I need to let it go

Remembering I need to say goodbye
Remembering I'll need to leave you by his side
Remembering I'll have to let go

Wondering if you will still think of me
Wondering what will happen when I leave
Wondering when I will let go

Letting others in
Letting my feelings stay inside
Letting go

Jade Whitmer

Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High
6th Grade, Honorable Mention

The Snyerwhip

It was after midnight, and the sand did blow.
And there was one place where no one shall go.
But one young girl, with her bow and spite,
That is where she went, despite her fright.

The monster she hunted was small and puffish.
Oh, how she underestimated it, in all her bufffish.
It's long, spindly legs, a joint every inch,
Yet its body was no larger than a finch.

Yet when it sucked in air, its body grew
Which inevitably spelled out her doom.
Its sticky skin collected the sand.
Its smell stunk worse than Pmud land.

It gimble and gyred, deep in the rocks.
The girl searched, eyes like a hawk's.
The Snyerwhip arose and grew eight times in size.
It ate the girl in one bite, like a box of fries.

It was after midnight, and the sand did blow
And there was one place where no one shall go.
But one girl, with her bow and spite,
That is where she went despite her fright.

Clara Still

Washington Grade School
6th Grade, 3rd Place

No Beginning, No End

Life before you and me was not the beginning of things; there is no beginning to this story.
That is why there is no beginning to your or mine, or to the ones before us.
Life after you and me is not the end of things; there is no end to this story.
That is why there is no end to your and mine, or the ones that come after us.
All that you need to know is that there is...
No beginning or end to the story.

Theodore Meagher

Washington Grade School
6th Grade, Honorable Mention

When Love Found Me

I didn't know I was drowning
because I had gotten used to the water.
Heavy days felt normal.
Silence felt safer than hope.

Then love showed up
quietly
not like fireworks,
not like a movie scene,
just a hand reaching for mine
like it planned to stay.

Love didn't erase my scars.
It traced them gently
and said,
"You're still worth holding."

It didn't fix me overnight.
It sat with me
on the hard days.
It answered my late-night thoughts
with patience instead of leaving.

Where I saw damage,
love saw strength.
Where I saw too much,
love saw enough.

And somehow,
without shouting,
without demanding,
love rewrote the story in my head.

It taught me
that I am not my worst days.
That my heart isn't a burden.
That staying is possible.

Love didn't save me
like a hero in a story.

It saved me slowly
in soft words,
in steady arms,
in the choice
to remain.

And that kind of saving
feels the most real of all.

Kalliape Butler
Hays Middle School
7th Grade, 1st Place

The People I Used to Know

This lady smiled every day.
She was always talkative.
She was patient and kind.
Her hair was always nicely done.

This man was always happy.
He had white hair and striking blue eyes.
His laugh was always jolly and loud.
He always asked me how I was any time I visited him.

This lady wore the neatest braids in her hair.
She was very gentle.
She had a soft, angelic voice.
She always got excited when she won a game of BINGO.

This lady loved red.
She was a fantastic storyteller.
Her love for her husband was stronger than titanium.
She had the most beautiful long white hair.

This lady had short grey and white hair.
She loved her daughter very much.
She had four very good friends she sat with always.
Her presence was always gentle and warm.

This man was always happy and lively.
He was always encouraging and respectful towards everyone.
He loved his candy, especially his gummy worms.
He loved his family, especially his mother.

I miss all of these people very much.
I wish they were still here.
But, I have comfort knowing,
That they are resting peacefully in Heaven.

Gianna Ochoa
Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High
7th Grade, 2nd Place

Because We Grew Up

All of the laughter
All of the smiles
All of the happiness
All of the love

As kids it is awesome, but are we going to grow up?

Right now all of that, they say it is there, but if so, where?

Where is the extra giggle in the laugh?

Where is the missing tooth touch in the smile?

Where is the extra moment that makes you want to stop and take in all of the happiness

Where is the extra squeeze when you hug someone you love?

Where is it?

The extra giggle when friends were silly

The missing tooth that everyone wanted to know the story behind when you smiled

The happy love that you shared when you were trying to see who could give the better hug

If it's truly not here, what is in its place?

Worry
Heartbreak
Sickness
Sadness

All causing less
Less laughter
Less smiling
Less happiness
Almost no love
Is this growing up?

If this is the way it is

Why?

Why do we settle for less?

Why are we fine to laugh, smile, feel happy, and love less?

Am I the only one who feels like this?

Am I the only one wishing to be a kid again?

Every kid wanted to grow up, I did too

But now all I want is one thing

To laugh like I used to

To smile like I used to

To feel happy like I used to

To feel loved like I used to

To feel free without the worry of what others think about me

Because we grew up, everything comes back to one phrase

What if...

What if I don't want to grow up anymore

What if I want to be a kid again

The kid that laughs, smiles, feels happy, and loves more

What if that is the kid I want to be again?

Harper Nicholl

Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High

7th Grade, 3rd Place

Human

The hardest part about being human,
Is all the quiet chaos that we're consuming.
We walk around with hearts made of glass and gold,
And we are afraid of the stories that remain untold.
Yet we seek the sun in the dead of night,
As if chasing the ghost of a flickering light.
We'll build up walls just to find some peace,
As we pray the noise in our heads will cease.
We carry the years like heavy stones,
Feeling the chill that lives in our bones.
We love with a fire that burns too bright,
And weep when those embers fade from our sight.
We dream of wings yet are bound to clay,
As we count the slow minutes of every day.
We starve for truths we will never grasp,
As we hold the world with a trembling clasp.
We remember the faces of those long gone,
While time relentlessly ticks on.
We fear the end of the songs that we sing,
Yet we marvel at every blooming thing.
Our minds are oceans that are deep and wide,
With nowhere left for our soul to hide.
We are the question and the answer, too,
It's a confusing life of gray and blue.
But truly the hardest part is just letting go,
Of everything that we have come to know.
But the sweetest part of our mortal breath,
Is loving life in the face of death.

Mila Womack

Hays Middle School

7th Grade, Honorable Mention

Howling Whisper

The wind doesn't whisper,
It speaks in long sentences,
Rushing through a field
Like oceans made of air.

Grain elevators stand tall in the wind,
Overlooking each sunset,
As if its the first one
No matter how many they've witnessed.

Trains travel,
Like wandering thoughts
They don't stay
But leave their mark.

As soft tires roll slow,
The streets hum,
The lamp posts flicker to life,
One by one like tired eyes.

In this small town,
The endless horizon,
The sea of wheat,
The rolling wind.

Hays doesn't shout,
It doesn't have to.

It just waits breathing the wind,
It knows you'll look back
To the horizon, the wind, the prairie,
And the slowly rolling hills, knowing you'll look back,
Knowing you'll return.

Brecken Kennedy

Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High

8th Grade, 1st Place

Earth's Children

It's incredible, isn't it.
Wings of steel that bring us up.
Infernal walls to keep us warm.
Space that folds in around our minds.
In the stars.
Ash and dust fall like feathers as Gaia's safety takes us back.
Earth's children. Ever bound. Ever curious.
As we leave, we never forget our lessons lest the void takes our errant souls from grace.
In the stardust.
As Chaos swallows us whole.

Ryleigh Kuehl

Hays Middle School

7th Grade, Honorable Mention

Beyond the Skin

“We love your food and your culture!” they say,
but they don’t love us at the end of the day.

What more can we give, when we’re
tired and afraid?

They love to say “one bad apple ruins the barrel!”
but it only applies to us,
not them.

This land was meant for everyone,
not just the one.

All we want is to live, but
they just want us to give. Until we’re done
and they want us gone.

We are all people who deserve a chance,
but why don’t they care enough
to spare us a second glance?

Is it too much to ask,
to just be treated like their own?

All we can hope for is the world to realize that
no matter what, the world keeps
on spinning and the sun still sets while
the moon rises.

And that when the sun sets and they lie in their bed,
nothing changes the fact that we both
bleed red.

Arianna Cantrell-Diaz

Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High
8th Grade, 2nd Place

The Clock

Time ticks loud on a hardwood floor,
a heartbreak echo a distant roar.
The ball comes up the play in mind-
A race against the second grid

Memory holds the lines we trace,
Cuts and screens that shape the space.
Five steps and go trust the pattern and feel the flow.

Dalton Herrman

Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High
8th Grade, Honorable Mention

The Soundproof Room

I speak in paragraphs, sometimes in screams
I whisper secrets and I shout my dreams
The air vibrates, I know the sound is real
But when it lands, they act like they don't feel
The impact of the words I throw and send
My voice, to them, is just a broken trend.
It's like I'm standing in a soundproof box
Behind thick glass, impervious to shocks
My lips are moving, making shapes and sense
But their glazed eyes just raise my defense
A silent veto, a polite, cold shrug

They smile and nod above their coffee mug.
“How was your day?” they ask, their thoughts elsewhere
I could say, “Fine,” or “I have wings and purple hair,”
And the response would be the same slow beat:
“That’s nice, dear,” as they scroll or check their feet.
I shrink the thoughts inside my heavy head
And wrap the silence like a blanket spread
Because the truth is, if they wouldn’t hear
A cannonball, they won’t hear one small tear
I’ll save my words, my breath, my energy
Until the day someone decides to see me

Isabella Anderson

Hays Middle School
8th Grade, 3rd Place

Am I Pretty Yet?

I am pretty,
Only your average pretty, the type to get pity.
Brunette, tall, and brown-eyed,
But their gaze is always pulled to the side.
A blonde, small, and blue-eyed girl,
Gets all the attention, like a million dollar pearl.
She's real pretty I'll bet,
But am I pretty yet?

I am pretty,
But I stand next to my smaller, blonder friends, and I get kind of dizzy.
I look into the mirror and to my utter shock,
There is acne on my face in little stubborn spots.
I scramble to my vanity to hide behind makeup,
So I can be approved by every person I face in each day's wakeup.
All this makeup I use, may put me in debt,
Just so I can ask, "Am I pretty yet?"

I am pretty,
But boys notice my friends and only give me pity.
I walk around, but every full body mirror I see,
Reminds me of how I wish I could change my body.
I want to be thin, but not too thin,
For there might be rumors of me being starved within.
Mirrors might be the worst thing I ever met,
They leave me wondering, am I pretty yet?

I am pretty,
But I only get pity.
I don't like being so fake,
But my reputation's at stake.
And if they see my figure, or my bare face at that,
They won't even return a look at.
I'm caught in a very tricky net,
Am I pretty yet?

Myka Schoepf

Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High
8th Grade, Honorable Mention

The Blind Man

A man walks on grass so green,
Watches life through a television screen,
Black and white fill his view,
Other colors he never knew,
While he watches his grey film,
He wonders what colors fill your realm,
Is your movie as bland as his?
Is the sunset more opulent than this?
As he walks through silent bliss,
He wonders why color brings fists,
People fight over meaningless grey,
If everyone was as blind as him,
Would it save the day?

Keaton Gottwald

Victoria Jr. High School
8th Grade, Honorable Mention

Strength

Resistance creates strength
Even when friends are kept at an arm's length.
Tough times happen
Sometimes from just one action.
But you persevere
No matter what you overhear
Bonds are made
You never want to trade
The ties you share
With the people who care.

Kennedy Orr
Victoria High School
9th Grade, 2nd Place

The Rollercoaster

You're a rollercoaster they say.
Full of ups and downs, highs and lows
The second they say that I internally collapse
I sit there silent, taking all the blows
I sit there knowing I can't relapse
They tell me I'm acting like my mother
You're at an early stage you can stop this now if you wanted
I look at them different than any other
My mind empty but still filled with past memories like room that's haunted
I know what they mean
They're saying I'm bipolar
It burns and stings it feels like everything is closing in
A voice repeats you're turning into her
How am I supposed to not act like my mother when you constantly bring her up?
You're a roller coaster they say,
Full of ups and downs highs and lows
Except every time I'm going up
Something happens and I crash back down.

Katelyn Haddock
Victoria High School
9th Grade, 1st Place

Checkmate

Confident and experienced
Practice and choices got me here.
My opponent will be silenced.
Taking a seat, crack a root beer

Making my moves, responding quick
Building my castle, brick by brick
Preparing my gambit, I sit
Misplaced a pawn, could not fix it.

Hands shaking and full of pure dread
In old age, I'm losing my head.
The monkey, with a gloat and sneer.
Starting the end of my career.

Plays and pawns deciding my fate.
Moving a bishop, rook, or queen
There was still one move left unseen
One mistake leading to checkmate

Amos Buller
Hays High School
11th Grade, 2nd Place

Tattered Pantyhose

Pulling smokey skin down like sleet,
thinly veiling over battered feet,
my thick legs are ice-cold.
They barely shiver from my scolds
of ugliness under,
coarse hairs threatening to plunder.

Staplers, copiers, and receptionists,
fake smiles; I have always been a perfectionist.
All this job has been is customer service,
I'm leaking out, searching for some kind of catharsis,
when I molt; reptile skin
anamorphous chrysalis.

My thin, torn veil; however faithful,
stretch marks down to my ankles.
The fabric rips and I can hardly sit
with this reflection out of slip.

They bunch up; malleolus halos, a mirror bruise,
I'm stark naked; no more office cubicles.
Now I've shed my fire and my embers,
yet my face still hardens with tremors.
Really—I'm surprised my body even fit.
It only bent under pressures' pit.

I burn this tattered pantyhose,
ugly without my dressing clothes.

Macie Herman
Hays High School
11th Grade, 1st Place

Stare

I stare down at the paper it stares back at me.
We've been in a showdown since period three.

Emmit Stoffel
Victoria High School
9th Grade, 3rd Place

Simple Pleasures

I open the door, warm sunlight caresses my face,
Blue sky stretches, soft cloud in grace.
Refreshing spring breeze moves in gentle play,
Leaves whisper softly as branches sway.
New flowers peak on the edge of bloom,
Birds trade songs as squirrels dart around with room.

I step back in, the world still fresh and bright,
Slice an apple and enjoy a crisp, juicy bite.
Cereal crunches, banana melts on my tongue,
Toast browns, morning's quiet joy began.

I pull out a book, its pages scent the air,
Thin sheets flutter, knowledge light as prayer.
Stories awaken, dancing in my mind,
Worlds emerge, leaving time behind.

From reading's calm, soft music drifts near,
Melodies begin, filling the quiet sphere.
Bow glides, strings hum, music takes flight,
Notes soar, dancing in the afternoon light.

As night falls, stars blink in the darkening sky,
A calm moon rises, glowing softly by.
Gentle silver light drifts through my windowpane,
Lulling me to sleep, washing off the day's refrain.
In dreams I wander through simple pleasures found,
Daily joys uncovered, quietly all around.

An Li
Hays High School
10th Grade, 1st Place

The Perfect Day

A perfect day would start
with waking up feeling refreshed
and excited for the day.
You begin with a nice, relaxing morning walk.
A quick gym session would follow.
Once home again,
a nice long shower would be amazing.
After the shower,
a wonderful breakfast and coffee come next.
It is beautiful outside,
so you enjoy breakfast out on the porch.
The rest of the day consists of tanning by the pool,
a book in hand,
fun drinks all day long
to keep you nice and cool.
Once night hits,
you get to go out to dinner with your best friends.
After dinner comes a matching PJ set
and freshly washed sheets.
You put on your favorite TV show
and a facemask.
You fall asleep smiling
because of how perfect the day felt.

You wake up.

The perfect day
was just in your dreams.
Reality sets in,
and you realize how tired and drained you feel.
Besides being tired,
you still must get up
and get ready for school.
You wake up late,
so you skip breakfast.
You arrive at school feeling horrible.
Yet you somehow make it through the school day,
but you can't go home yet.
Now you have basketball practice
till it is dark outside.
Following basketball,
you go to the gym to lift.
The gym is packed,
You can't get your full lift in and decide to leave.

Now that it is almost 8 p.m.,
you can finally go home.
You walk into your house
and immediately clean the kitchen
and, on this particular day, make dinner.
After you finish the cooking and cleaning,
you can finally eat dinner at 9 p.m.
You get to take a shower,
and then study
for all the tests you have the next day.
Now it is 11 p.m.,
and you are so tired
you can't keep your eyes open.
You can't wait for the weekend to sleep in.
Then you remember
you work at 7 a.m. all weekend.
You fall asleep
feeling defeated,
that tomorrow will be the same.

You wish the perfect day in your dreams would soon become reality.

Brooklynn Koerner
Hays High School
11th Grade, 3rd Place

2026 Creative Writing Awards ~ Prose

<i>Gr.</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Title of Work</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Teacher</i>
K	1st	Luke Schoenthaler	<i>Map</i>	Washington	Ashley Dusin
K	2nd	Colton Jacques	<i>Invisible Soccer</i>	Washington	Ashley Dusin
K	3rd	Ella Gaschler	<i>Gingerbread Man</i>	St. Mary's	Shelby Trickle
K	HM	Kendall Miller	<i>Pet Unicorn</i>	Washington	Ashley Dusin
1	1st	Myles Stewart	<i>Best Friends Never Go Extinct</i>	Wilson	Kenda Leiker
1	2nd	Freddy Pixler	<i>Through the Portal with Spacelules</i>	O'Loughlin	Kenda Leiker
1	3rd (t)	Aiden Key	<i>Stego</i>	Washington	Kelsie McMillan
1	3rd (t)	Easton Flinn	<i>Me and My Friend and the Dragon</i>	Washington	Kelsie McMillan
1	HM	Raylan Henman	<i>Me and My Friend</i>	Washington	Kelsie McMillan
2	1st	Colton Tiernan	<i>Horror Day</i>	Holy Family	Kenda Leiker
2	2nd	Anna Herman	<i>The Friends in the Old Oak Tree</i>	Wilson	Kenda Leiker
2	3rd (t)	Rhett Felder	<i>Crazy Bunnies</i>	Holy Family	Cristy Dinkel
2	3rd (t)	Baylor Ruder	<i>Detective Pickle and the Case of the Missing Cookies</i>	Wilson	Kenda Leiker
2	HM	Wade Stacken	<i>The Unsuspected State Shuffle</i>	O'Loughlin	Kenda Leiker
3	1st	Ihora Bhoumik	<i>The Secret That Lies Beneath Hampton Elementary</i>	O'Loughlin	Kenda Leiker
3	2nd	Andrew Greenleaf	<i>Peter and the Secret Island</i>	Wilson	Kenda Leiker
3	3rd	Rhys Hillebrand	<i>Three Moons and a Warning</i>	Roosevelt	Kenda Leiker
3	HM	Julian Gottschalk	<i>Disasters</i>	Washington	Jessica Russell
3	HM	Raewyn Schmeidler	<i>The Great Tarantula Escape</i>	Roosevelt	Kenda Leiker
4	1st	Leah Hillebrand	<i>Through Time</i>	Roosevelt	Hannah Wince
4	2nd	Jayden Qi	<i>A Waterpark Adventure</i>	O'Loughlin	Hannah Wince
4	3rd	Tommy Detrixhe	<i>The Life of a Book</i>	O'Loughlin	Hannah Wince
4	HM	Raelyn Carter	<i>Lost</i>	Wilson	Laurenda Jacobs
4	HM	Benjamin Dumler	<i>The Obstacle Course</i>	O'Loughlin	Denise Danielson
4	HM	McKinley Manning	<i>A Crazy Summer</i>	Wilson	Laurenda Jacobs
4	HM	Kyler Martin	<i>Big Colorful Circle Ride</i>	O'Loughlin	Denise Danielson
5	1st	Elena Greenleaf	<i>Planet with No Adults</i>	Wilson	Alicia Plante
5	2nd	Cambree Schmidt	<i>Spy Dog</i>	O'Loughlin	Hannah Wince
5	3rd	Shaylie Gaschler	<i>The Test</i>	St. Mary's	Katie Brungardt
5	HM	Emma Wichert	<i>The Adventures of Lenny and Gerald</i>	Washington	Emily Burd
5	HM	Brecklyn Kregar	<i>The Long Hike</i>	Wilson	Alicia Plante
6	1st	Annie Hertel	<i>Back In</i>	TMP-M JH	Conor Nicholl
6	2nd	Brinley Maska	<i>The Echo of Amber Woods</i>	HMS	Colton Gladow
6	3rd	Hattee Deutscher	<i>Anaconda</i>	St. Mary's	Brad Tebo
6	HM	Brynlee Johnson	<i>The Trouble in Science</i>	HMS	Sydney Niernberger
6	HM	Jade Whitmer	<i>Imagining</i>	TMP-M JH	Conor Nicholl

Gr.	Place	Student	Title of Work	School	Teacher
7	1st	Ryleigh Kuehl	<i>Intertwined and Soul-bound</i>	HMS	Megan Pantle
7	2nd	Mila Womack	<i>Feeding on Fear</i>	HMS	Megan Pantle
7	3rd	Kash Wendland	<i>The New Role</i>	TMP-M JH	Conor Nicholl
7	HM	Charlotte Mergen	<i>The Silent Rebellion</i>	HMS	Amy Schmidt
8	1st	Jose Lopez-Rodriguez	<i>Lost One</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
8	2nd	Brittany Schmeidler	<i>Fractured Fairy Tale</i>	HMS	Meagan Englert
8	3rd (t)	Shea Goddard McGuirk	<i>New World</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
8	3rd (t)	Weston Unrein	<i>From My Point of View</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
8	HM	Oliver Stoecklein	<i>Change</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
9	1st	Morgan Corsair	<i>Hydra Enemy of My Enemy</i>	Hays High	Brandon Hardwick
10	1st	Lily Stivers	<i>When the Snow Stops</i>	Hays High	Jessica Clingan
10	2nd	Elisabeth Bergman	<i>Where the Music Waits</i>	Hays High	Jessica Clingan
10	3rd (t)	Bekah Clark	<i>Frosted Mirror</i>	Hays High	Jessica Clingan
10	3rd (t)	Chase Baldwin	<i>The Burden of Everlasting</i>	Hays High	Jessica Clingan
11	1st	Brayden Staley-Herman	<i>The Last Red Button</i>	Hays High	Dave Buller
11	2nd	Elisabeth Hyatt	<i>In His Image</i>	Hays High	Maleigha Albers
11	3rd (t)	Macie Herman	<i>Dinner</i>	Hays High	Maleigha Albers
11	3rd (t)	Jocelyn Goodspeed	<i>Soul Ties</i>	Hays High	Dave Buller

2026 Creative Writing Winning Entries ~ *Prose*

Map

On a rainy day, a monkey at a zoo was swinging from a tree. A map fell out of the tree. The map showed him how to get to the Amazon Rainforest. So, he goes to the Amazon and lives there now.

Luke Schoenthaler
Washington Grade School
Kindergarten, 1st place

Invisible Soccer

A boy puts on an invisible shirt and plays soccer with his dad. He uses the shirt to disappear. He scores a goal against his dad. The boy wins against his dad and that was really good.

Colton Jacques
Washington Grade School
Kindergarten, 2nd place

Gingerbread Man

The old lady made the gingerbread and then it ran away. Then, the old granny chased after it. Then, the man chased after the gingerbread. The gingerbread man hid. They came up to a girl that thought it would be tasty.

Ella Gaschler
St. Mary's Grade School
Kindergarten, 3rd place

Pet Unicorn

There was a princess and she lived in a castle. She met a unicorn one day while walking. She took the unicorn back to her castle. She kept the unicorn as her pet.

Kendall Miller
Washington Elementary
Kindergarten, Honorable Mention

Best Friends Never Go Extinct

The beach was beautiful with all of the tropical trees, and it was covered with squishy sand. There were green mountains in the distance. The water was waving at a gentle speed. Along the beach were two Compsognathus who came for a drink of water. They were yellow and purple stripes. They were small, fast and carnivores. Their names were Cory and Morty.

The two Compsognathus were peacefully drinking when an Oviraptor snuck up on Morty and attacked Morty's chest. Cory ran in circles and moaned, but it was too late for Morty. The Oviraptor did too much damage and grabbed Morty's heart and ran off with it in his mouth. Cory was shocked! Morty's chest was hollow and he was DEAD.

Cory was depressed because he lost his best friend. He was determined to save his best friend. He watched the oviraptor as he left and saw that it accidentally fell off a cliff and died. So, Cory quickly ran and collected the oviraptor's heart. Cory knew what he needed to do. He found his friend the Dilophosaurus because he was the only dinosaur that had electricity to shock the heart. A little bit later Cory spotted the Dilophosaurus at the waterfront. He passed the oviraptor's heart to him, and he shocked it.

Once the heart started pumping, they put the heart back inside Morty. Morty was alive again! It was a miracle! That was enough excitement for the day so the two of them went back to the beach for a drink of water uninterrupted and peacefully watched the Pterodactyls fly high in the sky.

Myles Stewart

Wilson Elementary School

1st Grade, 1st Place

Through the Portal with Spacelules

One day there was a boy named Freddy. And he was happily playing My Singing Monsters on his iPad in the living room. When suddenly a ball appeared in the middle of the air! It looked like a blue, bouncy ball that was darker in the middle. It was kind of wavy looking. Then a mysterious figure hopped out of this bouncy ball headfirst and piece by piece. Now I realized it was a portal.

The figure came out piece by piece with lightning strikes holding him together. The monster gives Freddy a translator so he can understand what he says. He tells Freddy his name is Spacelules and he comes from Thunderstorm Simulator.

Then Spacelules asks Freddy to go to his world. He shows Freddy his friends, the islands he travels to, and the ethereal infections and all the evergreen marshes. The ethereal infections are creatures that get struck by lightning and come out of their statue form and come out singing. And the evergreen marshes start in a box then they wake up and come out of the box.

Before Freddy leaves, Spacelules gives him an earpiece so they can talk to each other from different dimensions. Then Freddy uses Spacelules' blue ball to go back to his world.

Once Freddy arrives back home, he decides to play outside and notices that there are no birds. So, he goes back inside to watch the TV and while he was doing that, the news came on. The news said that there were no birds in the air and that was very strange. Freddy thinks maybe Spacelules can help. He presses a button on his earpiece and asks Spacelules to come to Freddy's world again.

Spacelules comes to Freddy's living room and asks him why Freddy called him. Then Freddy tells him that the birds are gone! So, they start thinking of a solution. They spend all afternoon thinking and thinking. Freddy decides he's hungry, so they go to the kitchen and make Freddy's favorite meal, Mac and Cheese bites. It smelled really good when suddenly the birds came flying out of the portal and they attacked Freddy and Spacelules to get the Mac and Cheese bites. The birds got all of the mac and cheese bites in existence and then flew out the window. The problem was solved...the birds were back. It was a team effort between Freddy and Spacelules that helped solve the town's issue.

Freddy Pixler

O'Loughlin Elementary School

1st Grade, 2nd Place

Stego

There was a stegosaurus that was walking across the ice during the Ice Age. He found a hole in the ice. A hunter came up through the hole and captured him. The hunter moved him into a building. The stegosaurus was able to smash a hole through the wall of the building with his spiky tail. He found the hunter and defeated him.

Aiden Key

Washington Grade School

1st Grade, 3rd Place (tie)

Me and My Friend and the Dragon

Me and my friend went to the moon. Our spaceship crashed, so we had to figure out how to rebuild it. We found a blueprint where the spaceship crashed. We built it and were able to launch it. When we landed on Earth, we saw a dragon in the sky. We ran away but a person standing by us said the dragon was nice. We decided to play with each other.

Easton Flinn

Washington Grade School

1st Grade, 3rd Place (tie)

Me and My Friend

Me and my friend went on a hiking trip through the forest. There was no trail to follow so we ended up getting lost. We found a cabin. There was a fire pit outside. We went inside and found a dog. We couldn't figure out how to get home, so we decided to live forever in this cabin with our new dog.

Raylan Henman

Washington Grade School

1st Grade, Honorable Mention

Horror Day

My teenage friends and I went to a haunted hotel that was built in 1863. The reason we wanted to go was that we wanted to figure out why 15 people go missing every year. We planned to sneak out of our houses and meet up at 3 a.m. I told everybody to bring holy water, and I brought my Polaroid camera. We hopped on our dirt bikes and rode through the dark forest to get there. The hair stood up on our arms as we rode. It was about 3 miles away from our houses.

When we got there, I looked up at the hotel. It was hundreds of feet tall. John thought we should go inside. We looked around and saw a scary, dark room. Even though we were scared, we went inside. We saw a couch and a very old radio. We took a group picture as a memory with my Polaroid. While we waited for the picture to develop, we explored a little, but we didn't see anything unusual.

When we sat down to see the photo, John was shocked. In the picture behind me was a tall black figure hovering on the ceiling. As we wondered what it was, Baylor heard a terrifying voice say, "You're going to die!" Then a black figure leapt from the dark, and everything went black.

When we woke up, we were in a cage with some of the other missing people. We asked them what happened, but they didn't answer. We tried to persuade them to talk, and they finally gave in. One of them said that they had been stuck there for a while because the black figure would not let them out. He also said that the

black figure had no face, that its eyes were glowing white, and that it was about 8 feet tall. They thought the black figure was a demon. All we knew was that every once in a while, the black figure takes one of us from the cage, and we never see them again.

Suddenly, the black figure appeared. He stared at us for a good 3 seconds. Then he unlocked the cage door and lunged at us. He grabbed the guy we had talked to. We were scared to death! The black figure started to grab another person. I remembered that we had holy water. I yelled for my friends to take out their holy water and told them that when I said “go,” to throw it. Seconds later, we threw the holy water at the black figure. The demon melted, and everyone ran out of the cage and out of the hotel. When we got back home, I called the police and told them to investigate the hotel. That night, we all slept at my house. Around 4 a.m., I woke up to a strange voice that said, “I’m still watching you.”

Colton Tiernan

Holy Family Elementary School

2nd Grade, 1st Place

The Friends in the Old Oak Tree

One sunny, warm day, there was a caterpillar wandering around in the backyard tree. It was that time of year when the weather and seasons were about to change. The caterpillar had just inched his way up the old oak tree. He was searching for a place to settle in and form his cocoon. Once he found just the right spot with leaves and a fork in the branches, he got ready to spin his cocoon. The caterpillar was about to go into his cocoon when suddenly his friend, the roly-poly, climbed up the tree and asked, “Would you play a game with me?”

“No, sorry, I am trying to go into my cocoon,” answered the caterpillar. The roly-poly had a sad face and crawled away. So, the caterpillar continued working on his cocoon.

He got halfway into the cocoon when, a few seconds later, the ant came by and said, “Hi, Caterpillar. Would you mind helping me carry leaves to my colony?”

“Ugh...no, sorry. I’m trying to go into my cocoon.”

Then the caterpillar said to himself, “I need to get in my cocoon before the weather changes.” The caterpillar finally finished spinning his cocoon. Then it began to harden, it started to get dark, and the caterpillar fell asleep.

Two weeks later, the roly-poly and the ant came back to where the caterpillar had been, and a monarch butterfly was there! The roly-poly and the ant gave each other a confused look, and both asked, “Who are you, and why are you in the caterpillar’s spot?”

The butterfly excitedly responded, “I am the caterpillar!”

The roly-poly and the ant argued, “No you’re not.”

Then the caterpillar convinced them that he was the caterpillar and explained, “I was just in my cocoon, and when I went through metamorphosis, I changed into a beautiful butterfly.” The butterfly spread her wings and fluttered into the air.

The roly-poly and the ant said, “It really is her.”

Then the butterfly calmly said, “Yes, change is not always bad. In this case, it is beautiful!”

Anna Herman

Wilson Elementary School

2nd Grade, 2nd Place

Crazy Bunnies

Some bunnies were hopping along by some gardens full of flowers blooming. Then the bunnies hopped by many beautiful trees. Finally, the bunnies skipped by a wonderful city. Suddenly, a bunny catcher came and caught one of them. The rest of the bunnies attacked! They ripped his pants off and pulled the bunny out of the cage! The bunny catcher struck back, but the bunny kicked him in the face and punched him over and over again! The bunny catcher got arrested and was sent to jail.

Rhett Felder

Holy Family Elementary School
2nd Grade, 3rd Place (tie)

Detective Pickle and the Case of the Missing Cookies

Once in Little Kitten town, the Meow family was baking cookies at home. The youngest kitten was named Pickle. She was always curious and wanted to figure out things. So, it makes sense that her parents nicknamed her Detective Pickle. Her mom and her were about done with the cookies. The last batch was in the oven, and the sweet smell of cookies filled the air. Mother kitten told Pickle that she would get them out of the oven while Pickle got ready for bed. Pickle left and went to her room. Meanwhile, her mother got the cookies out of the oven to let them cool. Once cooled, she picked them up and carefully put them in a cookie container. Then she went to her room to sleep for the night.

Early the next morning, Pickle woke up and pounced out of bed to the kitchen. She was so excited to taste the fresh baked cookies that her mom and her made. When she got there, she saw the cookie container sitting on the counter. She was ecstatic! Without hesitating, she used her paws to open the lid. WHAT? The cookies were gone. Not a single crumb was left in the container. Pickle was devastated!

She paused for only a moment and then it hit her. It was time to become Detective Pickle. First, she looked all around the house. She found nothing. She wasn't getting anywhere and was starting to feel desperate, but she got an idea. She could ask her friend Lilly, the dog, to help her. Pickle knew that Lilly had the best nose for the job. Her sense of smell would definitely save the day or at the least find the cookies.

Lilly easily agreed to help because Pickle is her best friend and she would get a yummy cookie in the end. The two of them went into detective mode and started the hunt for cookies. The two of them went everywhere until there was only one place left to look...the alley. When they turned the corner, Lilly picked up a strong scent of cookies. Then Detective Pickle spotted some crumbs. The two of them followed the trail of cookie crumbs behind a wire fence and some garbage cans. When they got closer, there were two yellow eyes staring up at them.

There right before Lilly and Detective Pickle's eyes there was a big, furry, black alley cat devouring the cookies. When the alley cat looked up and saw Lilly's size in front of it, it immediately stepped and scrambled away. Detective Pickle quickly grabbed the remaining cookies and ran out of the alley with the cookies and yelped "yippee!" We got the cookies and ran home. The case was solved and then they finished the day by enjoying the last few cookies.

Baylor Ruder

Wilson Elementary School
2nd Grade, 3rd Place (tie)

The Unsuspected State Shuffle

One summer day in Oregon, scientist Wade was in his treehouse lab making a potion. Wade was looking at a map from the inauguration earlier in the year. He was going to get another chemical for the potion, and he accidentally knocked the potion over! It leaked through the wood floor to the roots of the oak tree,

which shouldn't have been a problem, but this time it was because this tree was unique and not like most trees. This tree's roots were deep into the soil and spread all over the United States! So, what's the problem?

Well moments later, Wade looked out the window and realized he and his treehouse lab weren't the only ones lifting. The entire state was drifting upward. Then Wade looked out his other window and was amazed and confused at the same time. He saw the state of Texas, Pennsylvania, Florida, and Washington lifting too! If that wasn't crazy enough, he noticed that the states started shifting and shuffling places to where other states were. The United States map would be a mess! It would never be the same and that was a problem.

Finally, he realized that the potion that he dropped was causing the state movement. Wade had to figure out a way to fix this disaster because there was no way to travel by ground since the states were floating in the air. He thought and thought and came up with the idea of making a reverse potion that would fix the problem by shuffling the states back where they were.

He quickly mixed the potion and put the entire reverse potion in the beaker and poured it on the roots of the treehouse and waited patiently for the potion to work.

Within no time, the states began shifting and shuffling to where they were before lowering down into place. Scientist Wade saved the United States and went back to his treehouse lab to continue creating other potions...this time he was extra careful not to spill.

Wade Stacken

O'Loughlin Elementary School

2nd Grade, Honorable Mention

The Secret that Lies Beneath Hampton Elementary

At Hampton Elementary School in room number 13, Jim always got distracted in class. "Jim, get out your workbook, on page 32 now," yelled out Mrs. Greenford.

"Okay," said Jim. All his classmates started giggling.

Ring a ling a ling. "Time for lunch. Line up," says Mrs. Greenford. "Jim are you okay!" yelled Mrs. Greenford, "This is the third time this morning that this has happened! Why do you always float up when you are near that spot? You need to explain."

"Well...", started Jim, "the thing is I would like to know what is wrong with the carpet. I always feel shaky when I go over this spot, and then it's like I thud down on the floor when I step away. It is perfectly fine in othe places on the carpet."

"How absurd, how can this be?" questioned Mrs. Greenford. She promptly went to the area that Him was explaining and stepped onto the spot. When she stepped onto the spot, she didn't float at all. With the two of them staring at each other with big eyes, Jim went on to explain that this was why he couldn't focus because this is all he could think of today. Mrs. Greenford immediately looked at the class and shared, "Well class why don't we investigate what is happening to Jim?"

The students began by using scissors to peel open the square carpet piece and noticed that there was a small hole in the ground. Several students tried to dig it out further, but it would not budge. Then suddenly, the spot started to lift out all by itself! The whole class stared in amazement. Then Jim peeked down the hole and saw a tunnel leading somewhere dark and creepy.

Of course, being curious, the class found themselves jumping down into the dark tunnel one by one. They had to crawl through the narrow tunnel for a short while and then it widened into an underground room. The kids and Mrs, Greenford noticed some gravestones piled up on the ground. As they were looking around, Jim noticed a big skeleton with sad, apologetic eyes. It moaned at Jim as if it were trying to say something to him specifically. This caught Jim's attention and he paused looking at the skeleton. The skeleton wasn't going to harm him. It was clear that the skeleton had something to share with Jim. That's when the skeleton started to whisper, "I'm so sorry that I was a bully many, many years ago to your grandfather. It has been bothering me all these years because I never apologized. I was trying to get your attention by making you float when you passed by. I needed to get this off my chest. Now that I have, I can finally be at peace and rest."

Jim, very calmly responded, “I understand. I’m sure my grandfather will be fine. He was a forgiving man. But what I don’t understand is why you are down here under the school?”

The skeleton replied, “Thirty-two years ago, I passed away and was buried in this cemetery. See, what you don’t know is that the school was built on top of an unmarked graveyard. That’s why you saw so many gravestones piled up in here.”

The whole time that Jim and the skeleton talked, Mrs. Greenford was watching from behind. Just as Jim was finished up with the skeleton, Mrs. Greenford announced, “Let’s go class! It looks like Jim has everything figured out.” Jim was so relieved that everything was sorted out and he would no longer be distracted by the spot on the floor of the classroom. Now he could focus on eating lunch!

Ilora Bhoumik

O’Loughlin Elementary School

3rd grade, 1st place

Peter and the Secret Island

One day Peter and his dad were fishing off the coast of Florida in their motorboat. They didn’t have any luck, so they left and went back to their house. His dad took a nap, but Peter did not feel like napping. Instead, he went back to the shore and got in his boat to start the motor. He decided to go out into the deeper waters hoping to catch a big fish. But once he got there, he didn’t have any luck catching a fish. Instead, he spotted an island in the distance and went toward it. He stopped the motor and went out to explore. It looked abandoned. By the looks of it, it was a rainforest but there was nothing there but trees. It was very quiet...no bugs, no animals, and no noise. It felt almost too quiet like there was going to be a trap, but there wasn’t.

Being curious, Peter went on to explore more of the island. As he went toward the middle of the island, it became foggy. This was strange. He continued to look for some signs of life but found nothing. Getting deeper and deeper into the island with more densely populated trees, Peter got lost with where he was. He also lost track of time, and it was getting darker. He knew he needed to get back to his boat. He went towards where his boat was but found nothing. It was gone! Then he remembered that he didn’t stop the boat motor. The boat could be anywhere. “Well,” he said to himself, “I’ll have to survive here for a while.” He started to look for materials to build another boat. He found tree limbs, but he needed them for the fire he was going to make because it was starting to get very cold. He made the fire and soon went to sleep.

The next morning, he was greeted by an unwanted gigantic storm! Peter ran to hide and take cover in a hole. He ducked in and waited for the storm to pass. Once the storm passed, he crept out and found that some of the trees had been knocked down. He took pieces of the trees that he could carry and went to the waterside. He began to build his boat but quickly found that it was harder than it looked. He wondered how long he would be here and if he would ever get home again.

“If I could just build a boat,” he shouted aloud in frustration.

“But you can,” said a voice behind him. Peter turned around there was a man with an axe right behind him. Peter jumped and stared at the man until the man continued by saying, “I can make a boat for you.”

“But how did you get here?” Peter asked. The man went on to explain that he had been here his whole life. Peter was confused and asked him, “But if you can build a boat, why wouldn’t you just make one and leave?”

I cannot leave this island because the island is cursed. When one person comes here, he must stay here until someone else comes...then they can both leave.”

“Okay then, let’s get to building and get out of here,” Peter shouted.

Once the boat was completed, they dragged it out to the water’s edge. That’s when Peter saw something in the distance and shouted. “There’s something coming towards us.” The man thought it was a sea monster or something like it. They could only see the shadow underwater, and it could be nothing good. So both Peter and the man jumped in their boat and start paddling. The underwater object continued to move closer and closer until CRASH! It hit their boat and launched them towards Peter’s town. The boat went sailing through the air. They landed with a splash right near the beach and swam towards their town.

Whatever was under the water had actually helped them by knocking them towards their home. It was such a coincidence! In the end, the two of them realized that they both had left their homes to go on a fishing trip that led them astray to the island. They needed each other to get back home. It was meant to be. From then on, the two shared their story with others. While no one believed them, they knew the story of the secret island was part of their reality.

Andrew Greenleaf
Wilson Elementary School
3rd grade, 2nd place

Three Moons and a Warning

Zane and his sister, Liz, were home alone. Zane was playing video games online in his room, and Liz was making dinner when their RING camera alerted them that a package arrived on their porch. Zane immediately told his friends that he had to hop off for a bit, and then he went to the porch to see what was there. When he opened the door, Zane saw a 5'x3' brown box with no return address, only a warning written in red ink on it. It said, "DO NOT OPEN ALONE." Of course, Zane thought this warning was a joke, so he picked the large box up and took it to his room to open it.

When he opened the box, he saw a blue, swirling portal with a green outline. He tried to pick the box up, but when he did, he got sucked inside to another dimension, Zane was surprised by what had happened! He looked around and saw hills all around him. He saw that all the hills were bare, with no visible life. It was dark with just enough light from one of the three moons to see around him.

After wandering for a while, he saw a pillar with an arrow pointing south. Thinking it would lead him to an exit, he followed the arrow. He started to follow the arrow and after following it for a while, he spotted some signs of plant life. He continued to walk in the same direction and came upon an oak tree. Since he was tired, he decided to rest under it. Zane fell into a deep sleep.

While sleeping, he dreamt that an entity said, "We warned you." Scared, he jolted awake and was breathing heavily. He looked around and saw another pillar with an arrow point west on it. Zane started to follow the arrow. As he walked along, he saw civilization in the distance. He headed toward it. Zane could see a city with the entities that he had seen in his dream. This was strange, but he kept going. He marched into the city. After wandering for a while, he saw another portal. Thinking it was an exit, he definitely entered it.

Once entering the portal, he felt really weird, and he blacked out. The next thing he knew, he was woke up feeling a little weird, but he was safe and sound in his bed. What just happened? Did he just have a dream within a dream?

Rhys Hildebrand
Roosevelt Elementary School
3rd grade, 3rd place

Disasters

Once upon a time there was a diner and a cabin on a mountain. There was a puppy named Howls and a kid named Astro. Astro was very adventurous and so was Howls. In the past, they have been on many adventures. For instance, one time someone tried to light them on fire. They knew that someone was trying to hurt them.

They were at their grandpa and grandma's house. They had been playing Monopoly for three days and Astro had 3,000 dollars in Monopoly money of course. They needed a break, so they decided to go on a walk. Howls knew what they were planning and he was at the door waiting.

They went on a walk and Astro and Howls could not find grandma and papa. Next, they instantly tried to get back! Astro said "Where are grandma and papa...I am guessing they are also looking for us. We better get back!" [meanwhile with grandma and papa]. "Where are you Astro and Howls!" said Grandma.

“Where are you guys,” said papa. [back by Howls and Astro]. “Come on Howls, hurry up” said Astro...[50 minutes later] they all met back up at the cabin. They were all happy. Later Howls and Astro go in the forest. Then they see a wolf. “Ahhh” said Astro. Then Astro plays dead, and Howls bites and defends Astro from the wolf. Howls barks and puts leaves on Astro to hide him. Then the Wolf runs away. Howls pounces on Astro who passed out and Astro wakes up and says, “thank you Howls, you are a life saver.” Then they made it back 30-40 minutes later. Then Astro says “we found a wolf and it tried to hurt me then Howls saved me.”

“Holy moly chicken smoky thank you Howls, are you both okay?” asked papa.

“Bark bark bark” barked Howls. Then they played Uno, Monopoly, Golf the card game, and green beans [our 3rd grade student teachers favorite side dish is green beans]. For the drink, they could choose from Fanta, grape soda, Coke, Pepsi, and Dr. Pepper. It took 1 hour to finish eating. Then Astro asked, “you want to play and hopefully finish Monopoly.” After 4 hours of playing, they finally finished...and [drum roll please boom boom boom clap clap clap] Astro won!!!! Then they put the game away and Astro went to shower then went to bed.

The next day, they went to the diner after they ate breakfast [eggs and bacon]. Then they were at the diner 40 minutes later. After 20 minutes of talking, they heard the ticking sound of a bomb and they were frightened. Then they ran for their lives. “3.2.1. Boom!!!!!!” Luckily, only their arms were bleeding. Then they ran home and put bandages on themselves and called 911. The helped them get better over the next few weeks. Now they know that someone is trying to chase them. . . or are they just hearing stuff? The end.

Julian Gottschalk

Washington Grade School

3rd grade, Honorable Mention

The Great Tarantula Escape

It was just a normal day at Roosevelt School in my classroom. But something felt off, we had not seen my class pet tarantula. We thought nothing of it and just thought he was hiding in his cage, because I saw him earlier. Others thought he was hibernating under his rocks because we know they hibernate.

After we came back from lunch, we looked again in his cage just in case he returned for food. I caught a glance at what I thought was him, but instead it was just his shell. Tarantulas shed their shell periodically, so he must be close b. As more time went by that day, we became more worried and realized something bad had happened...he had escaped!

The first place we looked was around the classroom. Was he in a desk? No. In a backpack? Still no. Thirty minutes later, we searched the entire classroom with no sign of him. That’s when I spotted a small strand of webbing that was thick enough to see. It led to the hallway, so that’s where we searched next. Was he on the crafts that we displayed in the hallway? No. On the ceiling? Still no. We almost gave up, but we kept going. We checked tons of other classrooms while the students were at recess. We had no luck in finding him. We also checked the music room, PE, art, library, and STEM, he was not in any of those rooms. We even check all the school bathrooms. Luckily, he was not in the bathroom.

We thought he was gone forever so we joined the other classes on the playground. I went to play on the ropes feeling defeated that we couldn’t find him. I barely noticed some webbing on the ropes. It was difficult to see because it looked just like ropes. I followed the webbing and there he was!

I screamed in excitement, and my teacher came to see what was wrong. When her eyes got big, it was clear that she saw our tarantula, so she went to get a water cup from the cafeteria to capture him. I helped my teacher capture him and made sure he didn’t escape. In the end, when we went inside, we thought it was because there was no food in his cage and he went out looking for food. So, from that day forward we always made sure there was food in his cage.

Raewyn Schmeidler

Roosevelt Elementary School

3rd grade, Honorable Mention

Through Time

RING! The loudest bell you could ever imagine shook Mrs. Moon's entire class.

"RECESS!" Everyone but Kali Through shouted. Kali was the shy girl, which you would think would mean they barely speak and play by themselves. But Kali was only one of those things. She loved sports! Every recess she plays 4-square. Sadly, she never got anyone out.

Kali walked into line for 4-square. She heard a laugh when she got into the first square. But she was not going to let that stop her!

The ball was served to Belle. Belle hit it to Stella, and Stella hit it back to the server, Xavier. He cherry-bombed the ball, getting him out.

The ball was served again. Straight to Kali. She hit the ball. Hit it straight to Belle. Belle missed the ball. *Out.*

Kali felt a strange tingle going throughout her body. Mabe it was just pride? It was more than just pride, something WAY more. Belle was mad, really mad, so made she could just scream. So, that is what she did. Screamed.

Kali ran away to go alert a teacher but then found herself in front of the Great Pyramid. Then, she saw her parent's wedding date. What was going on? Was it the tingle?

She saw herself playing 4-square. Ther was Xavier, walking away. Kali kept on teleporting through time. She was back at the Great Pyramid. But behind here wa a black goop-like object. It started taking the form of a...HUMAN?!

"Hi, I'm Xenos..." the goop-human said. The voice sounded very glitchy. "...and I am..."

"Going to...?" Kali asked.

"**TAKE OVER TIME! MWAHAHA!**" Xenos said.

"Hahaha, how are you going to do that?" She mocked him.

"Watch," he simply said, sticking his arm out. The pyramid became black and disappeared, while Xenos grew. Once the pyramid was gone, he stopped growing. He teleported through time with Kali, doing the same thing each time.

Now, they were at construction of the Statue of Zeus. Xenos did it again but could not teleport.

"Why can't I teleport?" he growled.

Kali looked up at him, with a smile on her face. She put her arm out and started absorbing Xenos, making him weak.

"You accidentally have helped me to control my powers," she said. Xenos was tiny when she was reminded of something. She remembered she had no friends, and this was her chance to make one.

"W-why'd you stop?" Xenos said. Kali reached out her hand and helped Xenos up. He became normal sized again, which is the same size as Kali.

"Let's be friends," she said in a gentle voice. He agreed and they teleported back to 4-square, before she got in. Xenos helped her get into the server square. Not only was he there for that day, but he also decided to stay with her forever, and they were the best of friends!

Leah Hildebrand

Roosevelt Elementary School

4th Grade, 1st place

A Waterpark Adventure

One scorching summer afternoon, Benjamin and his family went to the biggest waterpark in the country.

"Yay! Finally, we're finally here," he shouted! Ten minutes later we were done unpacking in the resort, which, to Ben, felt like ten hours. Just as he was about to jump into the water, his mother said, "Not so fast young man." "First put on sunscreen, you don't want to be sunburned," she reminded Ben.

"Fine," he reluctantly replied. Then just as he was going to run to splash with his friends, his mom said, "take your brother with you," she told him.

“No!” he exclaimed. His mother glared. “Fine!” he boomed, pulling his brother away. “What do you want to do?” he asked.

“SLIDE SLIDE SLIDE!” his brother exclaimed!

“Okay,” Ben said grinning. Walking over, they suddenly started running because the concrete was as hot as lava! “Run!” he exclaims! While they start running to the slide, they see a mini and a large slide. “Do you want to go on the big slide or the mini slide?” Ben inquired.

“BIG BIG BIG!” his brother excitedly shouts. As they climb up the stairs Ben starts trembling. “Are you okay, brother,” he asked. Ben shakes his head, too scared to speak. “It is okay,” his brother says softly. They slowly creep up the stairs and get to the top and get in line for the slide. Ben starts trembling again. “Take deep breaths,” his brother suggests. Ben takes three deep breaths.

“Ready to go down the slide?” the ride operator asks. Ben nods his head in approval. Ben and his brother get on the slide. “3,2,1,” the ride operator pushes them down! “AHHH!” he shrieks! Ten seconds later, they hit the water. “SPLASH!” “That was actually fun!” Ben exclaims!

“Yeah!” his brother adds. Then they hear mom call “Boys, it’s time to go now!”

“Thank you, brother, for your kindness and encouragement,” Ben says.

“You’re welcome,” his brother replies as they leave the waterpark.

Jayden Qi

O’Loughlin Elementary School

4th grade, 2nd place

The Life of a Book

Hi there. Yeah, you. Now I know what you’re thinking, “AAAHHHHH! A TALKING BOOK!” But I’m actually quite friendly. Sorry, I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Reed. Every week, I usually get checked out by a boy or a girl, and I usually love it. I mean, it’s incredible when a kid picks me up and gets sucked into the world of castles, princesses, and dragons, like what happened at Sarah’s house, where she couldn’t put me down. But sometimes I’m not so lucky, like at Henry’s house. How, Henry is a wonderful kid. He treated me amazingly, but it was his little brother, Mike, who ripped my pages. Luckily, the librarian, Miss Windholz, fixed it. Someone’s coming; quick, I’ve got to get back on the shelf. Phew, they passed. You see, no one really knows that I’m alive. Well, here comes a kid. I hope I get checked out. Wish me luck. He’s picking me up. He’s checking me out. Yes. Turns out this guy’s name is Sid. Wow, this backpack is cramped. Ah, here we are, Sid’s room: nice bed, good working area, mangled books, sturdy bookshelf. Wait a second, mangled books. Oh no, I’m in scary Sid’s room. Rumor has it that once you’re in, you don’t come out. “Sid, dinner.” Phew, his mom called him, that will give me some time to figure out a way to escape. Oh, there’s an open window. Time to escape. There’s the neighbor’s house. If I can get there on the power line, I’ll be safe. Whew, this is hard. Oh no, my grip is slipping. AAAAHHHHHHH! Wait a second, I’m not falling anymore. I’m in the hands of a kid, which means that this kid knows I’m alive. After that, he took me to the library, returned me, and checked me out. The kid’s name is Chris, and we usually hang out together at the library, though no one else knows our little secret. THE END.

Tommy Detrixhe

O’Loughlin Elementary School

4th grade, 3rd place

Lost

“Go get it, boy,” Devin called to his dog, Tiny. Devin threw a frisbee towards the woods, and the little wiener dog followed after it. Just before it reached the edge of the woods, Tiny burst into speed. He jumped up into the air to catch it...but missed just by an inch. The frisbee flew into the woods. Tiny chased after it, barking.

Devin waited for the dog to come back, but he did not. “Tiny! No answer. Devin picked up a nearby stick. “Come get the stick!” Still no answer.

Devin ran to the front porch and barged through the door. “Dad,” he shouted. “Tiny’s missing!” Dad got up from the sofa. “What happened?” he asked. “I threw a frisbee towards the woods for him to catch, but he missed and ran after it,” Devin replied, holding back tears. “Don’t worry, son,” Dad said in a serious tone. “We’ll find him.”

A few minutes later, they were ready to search the woods. They searched for hours, but there was no sign of Tiny. They were about to give up when they heard a howl. It was Tiny!

Devin turned and sprinted toward where the howl had been the strongest. The howling was getting louder and louder. When Devin made it to a deep hole, he stopped. Tiny was in the hole, scared and hurt. When Dad finally caught up, he immediately opened his backpack and pulled out a rope and a flashlight.

While Devin held onto one end of the rope, Dad climbed into the hole with the other around his waist. Dad picked up the shaking dog and Devin pulled them out. Devin grabbed his dog and hugged him furiously, crying tears of joy. “Don’t ever run away from me again.”

Raelyn Carter

Wilson Elementary School

4th grade, Honorable Mention

The Obstacle Course

Leaping off the army ladders, Jeff was tired from sprinting. He wanted something like a soda, but he was not in the mood.

He heard kids saying, “Let’s do the obstacle course again.” But he wanted something in a cold building.

Jeff was walking through the carnival when he saw the laser tag building. “Ahhhh!!” Jeff sighed in relief. Jeff ran to it because it also had air conditioning.

Jeff was tiredly walking towards the building. When he got to the laser guns, there were not enough laser guns, and they told him to leave. But he did not want to. He wanted to play a round, but they kicked him out.

Jeff was extremely disappointed. He wondered what to do. Then he remembered that he had a laser gun in his car!

“YES,” Jeff said. He ran over to where it was. “Finally, I have something to do,” said Jeff.

Jeff sprinted back. “WAIT!” he shouted. He showed the man the laser gun and got in before the round started.

Twenty-eight minutes later, it was a 1 vs. 1 and Jeff won! “YAY!” Jeff said and thought what an intense round.

He stepped out of the building and shook the other person’s hand.

“What a round,” Jeff said. He was feeling a lot more energetic and went back to do an even harder obstacle course.

Benjamin Dumler

O’Loughlin Elementary School

4th grade, Honorable Mention

A Crazy Summer

“I can’t believe it’s the last day of us being one of the younger students. I’m going to rule the school being an eight grader,” Lilly told her friends Axel and Emily. They made plans after school to go to the beach. While they were walking, Lilly saw a stray dog by the rose bush following her and she asked them if they saw it and they responded, “No.”

When Lilly and they got to the beach, Lilly wanted to teach Axel how to surf. Lilly and Emily knew how to surf but Axel did not, so she wanted him to know, too. When she was surfing, she saw the stray dog again, but did not think much about it. Lilly was super mad Axel was not getting it, so she went to surf on her own because the crashing waves are perfect for surfing, but when she got in the water, she looked scared. Axel and Emily saw something in the water, and it looked like a shark, so they were yelling but Lilly did not hear them.

“Omg! Lilly is going to die out there” Emily said, scared!

All they could see was Lilly’s long blond hair and the shark. Just as Lilly was coming back, the shark went under the board and bit it. Lilly was struggling to swim. People were panicking. The stray dog did not hesitate and jumped in the water. Lilly was passed out, but the dog brought her back to shore. Her parents got there and got her in the car and the dog jumped in and laid by Lilly. Her parents almost kicked her out, but Axel said she saved her life. All of them rushed to the hospital. “Will she make it?” Lilly’s mom asked.

“We hope so,” said the nurse.

They walked out into the waiting room. They all looked stressed. Even though the dog was outside, even she looked stressed. The surgery lasted at least 4 hours. After that, they all got to see her. The dog was barking, and the nurse felt bad, so they let her in. The dog ran and jumped on the bed. Lilly was so happy to see everyone, even the dog. After a while, Lilly could finally come home.

Lilly was in a wheelchair because she only had one leg, but she was happy to be alive.

“Mom, can we please adopt her?” Lilly begged.

“Okay, fine, you can keep her only if you take care of her” Mom said.

Lilly got out of her wheelchair and almost fell.

“I’m going to name her Rose because I found her by a rose bush,” said Lilly. A long time later, Lilly was healed and got a prosthetic leg. Lilly went through a lot that summer, but it could have been worse. But she was a little embarrassed when she went back to school, and she was the only one with prosthesis, but she also felt cool with it on. She learned to be more kind to her friends. Her friends helped her when she was healing. She made new friends and always helped the new kids. The summer before eight grade was crazy but she healed up and made a new friend with fur and four legs, Rose.

McKinley Manning

Wilson Elementary School

4th grade, Honorable Mention

Big Colorful Circle Ride

Jason was in line to eat some nachos at the food truck at the amusement park. Behind him, he heard people talking about how good the nachos were. Gradually, he crept down the line.

Once he got his food, he paid the man \$2 and turned around to find a table. He found one and sat down and started eating.

While he was eating, he looked around and thought about what ride to go on. When he finished eating, he got up to throw his trash away.

After he threw his trash away, he looked at the ride he wanted to go on and pointed at it. He instantly ran over and got on the big colorful circle.

After he paid 2 tickets to the ride operator, he got on the big colorful circle. Little by little, he slowly got up higher. When he got to the top, he exclaimed, “This view is beautiful.”

Suddenly...the ride stopped when he was at the very top. He was shivering in his boots. The ride operator ran, got security, and told security what happened.

Security ran over and yelled, “Everyone stay calm.”

Suddenly security fixed it, and Jason was so happy.

On the way down, he was smiling from ear to ear and thought, “I can’t wait to tell my family that I did something new.”

Once he got off, he thought about what to do next. Then he glanced at his watch and thought, “I need to go home.” He texted his mom to pick him up, and he got home safely.

Kyler Martin

O’Loughlin Elementary School

4th grade, Honorable Mention

Planet With No Adults

“Today my friend Avery is coming over!” I tell my little brothers as I pop two pieces of toast into the toaster.

They just sit there, not even half awake yet waiting for their breakfast. I sigh and spread strawberry jam on the crispy golden-brown pieces of toast and give them to my brothers.

After a delicious breakfast, the doorbell rings “Avery!” my little brothers exclaim.

I tell my little brothers to change out of their pajamas if they want to see Avery, so they run upstairs.

“Ah, peace and quiet,” I say as I walk to the door to meet Avery. I open the door and Avery and I walk to the kitchen. We sit down on hard wooden chairs and look around the dark room with only the bright yellow sunshine as the light source.

“Thanks for coming over, Avery!” I say as I finish eating.

“Of course!” Avery says.

“Have you ever wondered what earth would be like with adults?” I ask Avery.

“Yeah, I have.” Avery says as we both stare at the red sun rising over the dark horizon line.

“But I mean like, what I we had parents?” I ask.

“I think th-” Avery gets interrupted by my little brothers running in and hugging her.

“Avery!” they say with their adorable smiles on their faces.

“Well, I guess it’s time to work,” Avery says. I laugh and we all walk into the living room.

I better get you all caught up; I have two brothers, Andy and Anton, and a great friend named Avery. Also if you did not already know, I am on planet earth in 3046 in my house, and earth has no adults.

Anyway, back here, me and Avery sit down on the couch and turn on the TV to the news channel. Breaking News! The TV flashes in our eyes. Avery throws her feet up on the couch and reclines back on the couch.

“Ohhhhhh!” My brothers dramatically say.

I give Avery a quick wink and then look back to the TV. The news kid is talking about a citizen claiming to have seen an adult.

“Rubbish” Avery mumbles just loud enough for me to hear and makes room for me on the couch.

“They are always trying to spread lies” I say as I try to reach the rainbow blocks on the shelf for Andrew and Anthony to play with.

Avery turns the TV off, then the doorbell rings. “Who could that be,” I ask, looking at Avery with a confused and worried look.

“I will get it!” Anton yells.

“Wait!” I say, “I will get it.” I give Avery a, just to be safe, look and start to the door.

Once I turn the corner, I realize that this could be worse than I thought so I slow my pace down as I walk to the door. Who could that be at the door? Avery is already here, I wonder. Before I know it, I am at the door, and a ray of blinding sunshine hits my face as my fingers slowly slide onto the cold metal doorknob. Someone knocks on the door, my heart drops. I swing the door open to find an unusually tall girl standing on my porch with a worried look on her face. She had short red hair and almost looked like an adult, but there couldn’t be an adult in a non-adult world, right?

She gives me a warm smile and says, “Hello, my name is Jess!”

“Are you wanting to come in? I asked, very shocked. I don’t even know that girl, why did I suggest she come in? I ask myself as Jess takes a step forward to the house. I can’t let her come in! It’s not safe, I tell myself. But my fear rakes control of me.

“Yeah, that would be ideal,” Jess says.

What kind of kid would use the word *ideal*? I wonder as I motion for her to come in. She sits down at the kitchen table.

“Are you a kid?” Jess asks.

“Yes, are you?” I ask. What kid would ask if I was a kid in a kid world?

“Well, that is why I am here, I am...I am an adult.” Jess says.

I sit there shocked and confused, almost paralyzed by the fact that I have a human adult sitting in my kitchen. Now I’m regretting even looking at her, what will I do? I need Avery, I tell myself to lighten up my fear.

“I will be right back,” I stutter as I stumble out the door.

I need to get Avery, I tell myself. It felt like a million years just went by when I finally turn into the living room.

“Avery, come with me to the kitchen,” I say.

Avery gives me a worried look and then tells my brothers to stay in the living room and watch TV.

Avery follows me into the kitchen and gasps. “That is the adult that was on the TV!” exclaims Avery, staring at Jess.

“I know! Wait...the adult on TV? I ask, very confused how she knows that Jess is an adult. “How do you know that?” I ask Avery.

“When you went to get the door, I turned the news back on and they had a picture of the adult!” Avery explains. “Wow!” I say, “this is worse than I thought!”

“Let’s turn the TV back on!” Avery suggests.

“Good idea!” I say.

So, we all run back to the living room. Avery snatches the remote and turns the TV to the news channel.

“Even more breaking news!” the kid says. “The shield that protects us has dissolved and more adults are coming in every second!”

“What!” I yell, giving Jess a look.

“Once we got the message that kids were on earth and needed help,” Jess says.

“What?” I interrupted.

“We do not need help!” says Avery.

“The message said that you were running low on supplies because there were no adults around to produce the products.” Jess explains.

“Where and who did you get this message from, and how?” I ask, being very impatient.

“We still do not know how, but they contacted us from earth and we live on Mars!” Jess exclaims. “He said his name was Andy and he wanted more food because he was running out.”

Avery and I look at each other and start laughing so hard we fell off the couch.

“This isn’t funny!” Jess said. “This is a worldwide problem that we need to help with!” Jess yells over our laughter. “What is so funny?”

“An...Andy...is...my...BROTHER!” I say through breaths of laughter. “He wanted more fruit snacks one day, but we were all out and I told hi it was because we were running out and I needed to get some more!” “He probably thought I meant we were going to have no more food and he needed to tell someone so they could help!” I explain.

Andy stares at me, “I thought we were running out!” he says.

“Oh, Andy!” I say. “You are hilarious, now everybody on earth is worried adults are trying to invade and hurt us! We are going to be famous when we tell the news kid what happened!” I laugh.

THE END

Elena Greenleaf
Wilson Elementary School
5th grade, 1st place

Spy Dog

“Drive faster!” Racheal screamed at Ray. They were being chased by almost the whole L.A. Police Department for their 3rd bank robbery in the past 2 months. After a chase that had been going on for about an hour, they got away. Again! The L.A.P.D. does not know what to do anymore. So, the next day, they were planning. Everyone had bad ideas, but then Jake said something, the rookie who everyone thinks has no talent.

“What if we have a spy dog or something? A dog who Ray and Racheal will take in as their own, but the dog is just a spy, telling us information!” “That’s a horrible idea, Jake,” Chad responded, the L.A.P.D. chief.

So, they started planning.

They have a plan! Step 1, find out where Racheal and Ray are going next. They are quite sure it is the store, as they go every now and then to act like normal citizens, and get groceries of course. They put a VERY well-trained dog in front of the grocery store, they got him all dirty and gave the illusion of seeing his ribs, but you really cannot. About an hour later, you can see Ray and Racheal walking into the local supermarket. The 2 robbers are not the worst people. And they care for strays, they just yearn for being rich and love the criminal life. They see the spy dog as they are walking into the store, Ranger. They give him some treats then walk into the store. They know they should be paying attention, as they are criminals, but they just cannot stop thinking about that dog. On their way out, they cannot resist taking the dog home with them, so they do.

Ranger has a hidden camera and a hearing device implanted in him, so the police can see and hear everything they say and everything they do. The police aren’t going to try to capture them right when they have 1 clue, they’re going to try to get as much information as they can before they take action.

A few months have passed; the police need just a little bit more information before they act. They then realize a BIG problem. Racheal and Roy are starting to get very suspicious of Ranger. And if the police do not act soon, it might be too late. From the few months Racheal and Ray have had the dog, they know their real house is in New Jersey, and they know their exact address. They also have learned their daily routines. But one big problem is that they’re moving to a different house in Nebraska in two days, and the L.A.P.D. has no clue where it is. So they need to get all their planning done today and leave early tomorrow morning. Knowing what a time crunch they’re on, they get straight to planning.

About an hour later, they’ve got the plan. Since Ranger has a hearing device inside of him, the police can hear all of Racheal and Ray’s conversations. They know that they are selling their house in New Jersey and need to make it look nice. They’ve been ordering nicer furniture, so the house looks more appealing, of course. One thing that they ordered is a couch, and you can request for the delivery driver to come inside and help you put it together. Knowing all that, they’ve got their plan.

It’s early the next morning. They have an actor, also some backup. It’s about a 3 and ½ hour drive from L.A. to Nebraska. They get in the truck, which is a delivery truck to make it more believable, then start to head towards Nebraska. In the truck, they discuss the plan some more. They know that the couch should be arriving between 11am and 2pm. Knowing ordering stuff online, it usually arrives the latest it can. So the plan is to get there about 1:30, so they wait. A few hours later, they arrived. A very experienced actor arrives in his delivery truck, with a big heavy box that says: BLUE, MEDIUM SIZED COUCH, WITH FOOTREST. The so called delivery driver walks up to the house and rings the doorbell.

Rachael answers. “Who are you, do you have my couch?” “Yes, where should I set it up?” the delivery driver replies. “Uhhh, I can do it myself!” Rachael replies. “Well, you clearly requested that we help set it up and according to policy, you cannot change your mind. I have to set it up for you.” The delivery guy shows her a picture of how she did in fact request him to help set it up, but it was photoshopped. After seeing the picture, Rachael believes him and lets him inside. Before she closed the door, about 6 armed men rush inside. “HANDS ON YOUR HEADS. LAY FACE DOWN. IF I SEE YOU TWITCH, YOU’RE DONE!” Ray was sitting on the couch, he was shocked but got down on the ground, so did Rachael. The police cuffed them and put them in the truck to go to jail. Once the rest of the police heard about the news back in L.A. they were relieved. As they are putting them inside the truck, one police turned around to see Ranger. Ranger ran up to him and jumped on him and all the police were so happy to see him.

About an hour later, the story makes the news. All the police in L.A. are watching the news together, with Ranger of course, and giving him toys, a brand-new comfy bed, as well as treats, obviously! The title of this news story? Ranger, The Spy Dog. None of this would be possible without Ranger.

Cambree Schmidt

O'Loughlin Elementary School

5th grade, 2nd place

The Test

It was a normal morning, I woke up at 6:49, in a rush to get ready for school. We had a major test in first period biology, and I knew I couldn't be late. I rushed downstairs to get breakfast only to realize my parents were gone. I remembered they had told me I had to drive myself to school today. I started the car while getting ready. I was finally ready by 7:23. I wore blue jeans, a tight blue tank top, sneakers, and I threw my hair into a messy bun. I drove to school and got to class at 7:42. *Yes!* I thought. I made it for the test. After the test, I went to a couple other classes until it was time for lunch. I got my plate and sat down thinking about the test, just as I understood what the directions on number fourteen meant, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I jumped. "What!" I said. It was my best friends, Jason & Margo, whose real name was Margaret. "Come on," I said. "You two have to stop scaring me!" "How do you think you did on the test?" Margo inquired. "Ugh terrible," My shoulders slumped, "I completely guessed on number fourteen." "Cheer up, Madeline, it's only one test." "I guess," I moped, still hung up on number fourteen. The rest of the day went as slow as it possibly could. When I got home, I laid in my bed and fell into a deep sleep. It was the type of sleep you can't seem to leave. Suddenly I woke up, completely dazed. I scrambled to my dresser and looked at my clock flashing 7:30. *Oh no!* This would be my third tardy, and I knew I had a detention. I got my clothes pulled on, brushed my teeth and hair, grabbed my backpack on the way out the door and started the car. I drove as fast as I could until I hit a red light. "Of course," I mumbled tiredly. It seemed as if I sat there for hours. My mind was still foggy, like I had just woken. My thoughts were all jumbled together and I couldn't seem to tell the blurred words apart. The light turned green. I sped off though the completely cleared street. For a second, I thought it was odd that I was the only car driving, especially during rush hour. But the thought was erased from my mind as I pictured the dim classroom filled with bored kids and a teacher both counting the minutes until they can go home. I guess it was my fault, but I still dreaded the day ahead. I hit several red lights, all that I thought I could beat, but turned red immediately as my car pulled up. "Just my luck," I whispered under my breath. I glanced at the clock and saw 7:58 on the screen. I was just turning onto the street of my school when it turned 8:01. Anytime after 7:55 was tardy. I pulled to a stop in the school parking lot in a space closest to the building. I stepped out of the car and felt the bite of freezing wind across my face. I walked to the door of the school and walked in the door. I saw Ms. Robertson standing beside the stairs with an intimidating twisted snarl on her face. "G-Good morning, Ms. Robertson," I stuttered. "You're late again, Ms. Brown," she stated sternly. "I know, I apologize," I said while looking down at my blue sneakers. She sighed deeply and looked at me sharply. "Go to class, now," she said, beginning to raise her voice. "Yes, Ms. Robertson." I dashed up the stairs and crossed the corner to a familiar hall I took to my biology class almost every morning, but something seemed off about it. "Probably nothing" My brain pushed it away again, almost before I could finish it. I reached the door and ran into the classroom. All eyes turned to me. I watched their contorted faces elongate as I closed the door. There was a booming voice that broke the deafening silence. "What are you doing!" the strong voice yelled. I heard pounding footsteps reach closer and closer to me. I saw Mr. Moore, but he didn't look like himself. The Mr. Moore I knew, who was usually sunny and joyful, was now a tall man with long limbs and seven fingers on one hand. He seemed to almost grow as he towered over me. "I'm so sorry I'm late, Mr. Moore," I managed to get out. I looked at the clock but saw three hands instead of two. I hear eerie shrieks and bolted out of the door and ran outside to a giant endless field with a misshapen purple door in the center. I heard the school door open and close and saw the odd Mr. Moore holding a test with an F in red marker and my name on it. I ran as fast as I'd ever ran before, opened the door and then...I woke up.

Shaylie Gaschler

St. Mary's Grade School

5th grade, 3rd place

The Adventures of Lenny and Gerald

In the wet, foggy city there was a bird. The bird was a goose whose name was Lenny. Lenny was currently migrating to South Carolina for the winter with her flock. They were halfway to their destination when a terrible snowstorm hit! They heard it was supposed to happen around 8 PM! It was currently 4 PM! This was unpredicted, thought Lenny! Then, a huge gust of wind knocked her out.

Lenny woke up with a frightening surprise; there was a cat watching her. The cat's name was Gerald. Gerald was excited to see the new specimen of a bird in his backyard. Lenny was shocked there was a cat in her face! She tried to run from Gerald, but she could not! Lenny's wing was broken! Gerald introduced himself to Lenny, then Lenny introduced herself to Gerald. Lenny explained how her arm was broken and asked Gerald if she could crash at his place for a while, since she can't fly. Gerald was fine with that except he has one rule, **STAY AWAY FROM HIS OWNER.**

Later that evening, Gerald came back with a blanket and a sheet of metal. He leaned the sheet of metal up against the house. Then laid the blanket on the floor for Lenny. Lenny slept there for the night.

Life was going well for Lenny and Gerald. Over time, her wing got better. She could fly again! The night before she was about to take off, the owner caught her in the backyard! Luckily, the owner was really kind! Gerald just did not want Lenny to eat her food. Let's just say her food was not the best. Still, Lenny ate it to be polite.

The next morning, it was time for Lenny to take off on her flight. Gerald was especially sad. She was eating a snack before she left so she could have some energy for the flight. She gave Gerald a hug and left for the city.

Lenny made it back to the city safe. She went to the pond where her family was swimming. When her mom saw her, she was very exasperated. She leapt in for a hug, and they were a complete happy family again.

Emma Wichert

Washington Grade School

5th grade, Honorable Mention

The Long Hike

My parents made me wake up at 4:30 to hike to Sky Pond. We got ready and got in my grandma's car. We first drove into Rocky Mountain National Park and then drove to the hike entrance. Once we got there, we ate our breakfast while we waited for it to get brighter outside. Once it was bright enough to see, we started the hike.

Somebody said, "Can I hike with you?"

We said, "Yes" however, when we started hiking, he didn't follow us.

About twenty minutes into the hike, we saw a fox. It ran in front of my dad, yet he didn't even notice it until I told him about it. The fox was red, black, and white. There was also a stream next to us. A little while later, we got to the first big waterfall, we were going to climb up a different one later.

Around two hours later, we got to a lake called The Lach, and we rested on a rock there for a couple seconds. Then we started hiking around the lake and I said, "I'm done, can we go back to the car?" It is hard to hike in the mountains because of the elevation, so you get winded easily.

My dad said, "No, let's go to the waterfall, mom wants to see it." So we started hiking again. On the way to the waterfall, there was some cool stuff we jumped on that was over a stream. We also saw the guy that wanted to hike with us, and he was heading back to the parking lot already! He was dipping his feet in the cold water, and we thought it was a good idea, however, we didn't do it.

Once we got to the waterfall, we sat on a rock trying to decide if we wanted to climb up on it or not. The waterfall had the main waterfall that went straight up and down and a small waterfall off to the side that was a lot less steep that you can climb up to go to Sky Pond.

We decided that my dad and I were going to climb up the waterfall and mom was going to stay at the rock. We started climbing and made it to the top but there was another part. I decided I didn't want to go up to Sky Pond, so we hiked back down the waterfall.

About an hour later, we got back to The Lach. We found a rock and ate lunch on it. A chipmunk kept begging us for food, so my dad gave him an almond he had already dropped. Once we finished eating, we started hiking again. We saw another chipmunk, and he was eating a mushroom. He dropped it and when he picked it up, he rocked like a baby. We were trying to walk fast because there was a storm coming.

After a while, we got a bit lost but thankfully, there were other people and they told us where the trail was. It had started raining. After a while, it started hailing! We still had a while until we got back to the car, so we started walking really fast. Thankfully, the hail wasn't that big and we made it safely back to the car.

Brecklyn Kregar
Wilson Elementary School
5th grade, Honorable Mention

Back In

The air is still. Not cold, not warm, just still. The floor tiles are a shade of grey that every house is painted. The boring, old, grey color. The walls are a basic blue, matching the cabinets that held medical supplies. Machines beeped around me as I sat on the vinyl table colored the same color as the floor tiles. The man sticks little sticky pads on me. They're cold like ice. The pads are connected to the machines that flash with bright lights. My mom stood in the corner with her arms crossed and a sickened expression on her face. I felt oddly sick myself, not in the way I would stay home, in the way that I could just cry.

The man looked at the screen of the largest machine, then jotted something down in his notebook. He removed the sticky cold pads off my body and looked at me with a trusting expression "Everything looks good sweetie." he said with a new found tenderness in his voice "You can go get a sucker by the front desk while I talk to your mama. Kay?" I nodded my head and started to walk out as the man who went to my mother.

The door closed gently behind me as I walked around the bland hospital lobby. About five minutes my mom walked out with a smile that didn't look hundred percent real. She looked around and landed her eyes on me "Come on honey, you wanna grab ice cream?" I nodded my head eagerly. As I climbed into the car I caught a glimpse of my mom slumping down in her seat through the rear-view mirror. Little me didn't think too much about it though. After an awkwardly silent ten-minute drive we arrived at Dairy Queen. The colors that were once bright as the lights inside now seemed dim. We walked inside and heard the little ding of the bell. "Welcome to DQ guys!" Said the lady with a smile.

My mom walked up to the counter and ordered for us. About three minutes later the lady came back with a banana split and a smoothie. My mom grabbed them and handed the banana split to me "Here you go." I looked up at her wide eyed "All for me?" She nodded. I ate the banana split fastly, setting a personal record. We got back in the car and my mom looked back at me "Honey, I have to tell you something."

"What?"

"The doctors said that sports might be off the table or at least limited for a while."

"Why?"

"It's something in your lungs and liver Honey. Don't worry about it."

I slouched back thinking about my soccer teammates, the people I swam with, my tennis mates, and all my favorite sports, gone. I looked at her starry eyed "Can I try?" My mom sighed "I guess." She drove me to a small park and grabbed the soccer ball we keep in the trunk. I did just fine, no problems. Then we did it a week later. It was a bit more difficult than last time but I thought it was easy enough. We did it again and again and each time it was more difficult than the last. It felt hard to breathe.

Sports, what used to be my only hobby, was replaced by time fillers that didn't take much breath. Now everyday feels like a repeat of the last. The colors are bland, no games to win with a team, everyday it's the same schedule. Nothing's new. I used to look at the kids playing sports with pure envy in my eyes. I couldn't do any of that without feeling like death itself came for me. Sometimes I wonder if I will always be broken. Never normal, always the girl who can't do it. Always the lazy one. Checkups happen monthly and always end in the same words. "Everything looks good." And every time me and my mom get ice cream.

Until the last checkup happened. The man looked at me with joy I haven't felt in a while. "Everything looks great." That was a new word in the vocabulary he used around me. Now I wasn't 'good' I was great. I went outside of the room and waited for my mother. After sitting down and swaying for a minute my mom came out with a bright face. I climbed in the car ready to get ice cream except my mom didn't drive right away, instead she looked back at me "wanna start sports again?"

I looked at her with excitement "Yes!"

"We can try them again but it'll still be limited."

I smiled and nodded my head eagerly. We went to the park and played soccer. It was hard and my chest felt like a fire had started within it, but the hope of getting better made it worth it. We did it for weeks and gradually it got easier. And eventually I was back in the game.

Annie Hertel

Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High
6th Grade, 1st Place

The Echo of Amber Woods

The old storm cellar behind the Miller's house has been off limits since the "Great Flood" of '98, or so their dad said. But when you're thirteen, like Leo, and your fifteen-year-old sister, Maya is bored enough to start throwing rocks at the rusted padlock, "off limits" sounds a lot like "open me". Their six-year-old brother Toby stood behind them, clutching a plastic dinosaur. "Mom's going to be mad," he whispered, his eyes wide behind smudged streaked glasses. "Mom's at the grocery store Toby, don't be a narc," Maya muttered. She gave the padlock one final, frustrated pull. To their surprise, the rusted bolt didn't just snap, it turned into dust. Not rust flakes, but actual shimmering gray dust that floated upward with the non-existent wind.

The door creaked open, revealing not a concrete room, but a staircase made of white shimmery salt. "That's not right," Leo stammered, his voice dropping. He reached for Toby's hand instinctively. "Maya, don't," but Maya was already halfway down the staircase. She was the kind of person who jumped into lakes without checking for rocks. "It's glowing Leo! Come look." Leo groaned, pulled Toby close, and followed. As they descended, the air changed. It didn't smell of damp earth and old boxes like a typical cellar. When they reached the bottom, the cellar doors slammed shut above them with the force of a falling mountain.

"Guys?" Toby's voice trembled. "Where are the walls?" Leo turned around and felt his stomach drop. They were not in an old storm cellar. They were standing on a circular platform of white stone. It was in the middle of a forest, though it looked as if it had been painted by someone who had never actually seen one and wasn't quite sure how it should appear. The trees were impossibly tall, with wide trunks and polished leaves that glowed a soft pulsing amber. There was no sky, just a swirling ceiling of violet clouds that appeared to hover above the treetops. There was no sun, yet the unusual world was filled with a warm, golden light.

"It's beautiful," Maya breathed, though her hand was shaking as she reached for her phone. "No service, not even a SOS signal." "We need to go back," Leo exclaimed, his heart hammering against his ribs. He kicked at the salt stairs. "Maya the door is gone. It's just rock!" They spent the next hour circling the platform. The "forest" stretched out in every direction, silent and still. There were no birds, no crickets, not even a sound of wind. Just the low, rhythmic hum of the pulsing amber leaves. "Look!" Toby pointed. A few yards away, a trail of glowing blue stones wound through the trees. At the start of the trail a wooden sign was shoved into the ground. The wood was fresh, looking out of place against the foreign landscape.

Maya ran to it. Her face went pale as she read the carved words: *Welcome Home. The Door Only Opens One Way.* "This is a joke, someone must be pranking us with a LED light and holographic tech." Leo walked to the nearest tree and he touched the bark. The tree was cold, colder than ice and his reflection in the bark looked distorted, somehow older. "Maya this isn't a prank, feel the air." Leo stammered.

The air felt heavy, almost like being underwater. Every breath felt thick and weighted. "We have to find another way out," Leo said, trying to sound like the man of the house. "Toby, stay in between us. Maya pick a direction for us to go." They started to walk down the path of blue stone. As they moved, the forest seemed to react. The amber leaves turned a bright red, almost as a warning. The silence was suddenly shattered with a sharp sound, almost like breaking glass. Their pace slowed, eyes peeled for any approaching danger. After walking what felt like miles, the path ended at a massive wall of shimmering fog. It rose endlessly, blocking the horizon. Maya reached out a hand, but as soon as her fingertips touched the mist, she recoiled with a yelp. "It's solid and feels like cold

glass,” she breathed. They walked parallel to the fog wall for hours, following its glowing edge. The wall did not bend or break. It curved endlessly, in a perfect circle. They continued to walk in an endless loop. One filled with terrifying, but oddly beautiful trees.

Toby sat down on one of the blue stones, his lips quivering. “I want to go home. I’m hungry and scared.” Maya sat next to him, pulling him into her lap. The ‘cool sister’ act was gone. She looked at Leo, her eyes shining with tears. “Leo, what do we do? We’re trapped.” Leo looked up at the violet clouds. He thought about their kitchen table, the half-finished cereal bowls they’d left behind, and the sound of their mom’s car pulling into the driveway. Their mom would be so worried when she returned home, and they were gone. For a second, his tears almost swallowed him. He wanted to scream, to kick the trees, to cry until his throat hurt. He knew this was not the time to break down though.

Leo looked at Toby. His little brother was looking at him like he held keys to the world. Leo took a deep breath and sat down across them. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled granola bar he’d forgotten about. “Okay,” Leo said, his voice steady. “We aren’t going home tonight, maybe not tomorrow either, but look at this place. It’s full of life, and the air is breathable. We have each other and that is what matters.” He broke the granola bar into three pieces, handing the biggest one to Toby. “We’re going to build a camp,” Leo stated. “We’ll use those amber leaves for blankets, they’re warm. We’ll test the fruit on those low bushes. Tomorrow, we’ll start carving our own signs into trees, if someone else is here we’ll find them. If not, we’ll make this place our home.”

Maya wiped her eyes and nodded slowly. “The Miller kingdom,” she whispered. “The Miller kingdom,” Toby repeated, taking a small, brave bite from his granola bar. The violet clouds swirled above them, and the trees stood like silent soldiers. They were stuck in a world with no exit, a beautiful prison of light and shadow. As the three of them huddled together on the white stone, the silence of the woods didn’t feel quite so heavy. They didn’t have a way out, but they had a way forward. And for now in the heart of the Amber Woods, that had to be enough.

As the night settled over the siblings, they huddled closely together, sharing the warmth the amber leaves offered. Leo stayed awake listening to the steady breaths of Maya and Toby. The faint hum of the trees surrounded him as he took in the strange new world around them. They may be lost in a world with no exit, but they still had each other. Leo’s eyes started to close with exhaustion as the golden light faded and the violet clouds descended. They may not have a way out, but they had a way forward, and for now, that would be enough.

Brinley Maska

Hays Middle School

6th Grade, 2nd Place

Anaconda

Camilla Solis was a director, and her brother, Mateo, a camera man. They were the perfect team. They lived in Tulum, Mexico, but had big plans to travel to the Amazon Jungle to study a newly discovered species of parrot. The year was 1999 and the trip was finally happening. Camilla’s best friend, Sofia Garcia, was also tagging along. She was a zoologist, biologist, and part time animal photographer. Plus, Camilla’s right-hand woman.

They flew to the Amazon Jungle in a single engine plane. They were right above the Amazon River, landed safely, and grabbed their luggage. Then it was off to meet the captain of the vessel they would be taking down the Amazon River. “Ahoy there, my name is Leonardo, and I’m the captain,” said a furry gentleman with an eyepatch and a cigar hanging out of his mouth. “Nice to meet you Leonardo, we’re the crew here to study the Purple Striped Macaw,” replied Mateo sternly. Leonardo raised his eyebrows and replied, “Nice, well, get your luggage and let’s get on the boat, shall we?” The three travelers followed Leonardo through the jungle for about a mile until they reached a rickety dock on the edge of the massive river. It looked a mile wide. The boat was in rough shape, and as Leonardo grabbed Camilla’s hand to help her onto the floating death trap, she began to feel uneasy.

The boat, with the name ‘Marietta’ painted along the side, took off down the river. “Are you sure this boat will last the trip,” shouts Mateo over the roaring engine. Leonardo just laughed, and Camilla got that bad feeling again. Later that night everyone was sitting around a small deck fire eating canned beans spread on tortillas. Something fell from the canopy right into Sofia’s hair. Sofia screamed and grabbed at her head, clutched down on a small snake, and immediately threw it on the deck. Leonardo picked up the snake, laughed, and said, “This is just a little Dwarf Boa, harmless. It is the big boys you gotta look out for.” Leonardo then took the little snake into his captain’s den. When he returned Camilla asked him why he did not let the snake go? Leonardo told the group that Dwarf Boas make great bait for the big boys.

Mateo and Sofia went right to sleep, but Camilla still had a bad feeling. She stayed up and alert, watching Leonardo cast his pole in and out of the mighty river. There was a loud thud from underneath the boat. "What was that?" Camilla hissed. "It was a bite," shouted Leonardo as he jumped up in excitement urging Camilla to help him reel. Camilla asked him what he used for bait, and he told her the Dwarf Boa that fell on Sofia. The hair rose on Sofia's neck. If he used the Dwarf Boa, then a big boy must be at the end of the line. The only problem was Camilla was not sure what kind of big boy he was referring to, or why he was trying to catch one? Another huge thud slammed underneath the boat. Leonardo and Camilla were holding onto the reel with everything they had. The string pulled hard from the other direction and the reel screamed. Both Leonardo and Camilla fell on the deck in a pile. The pole ripped from both of their hands right into the river, still attached to whatever was on the other end of the line. "What was that?!" exclaimed Camilla, very out of breath. "Anaconda," said Leonardo flatly. Leonardo looked furious, so Camilla hurried off to bed before he had a chance to blame her for losing the pole.

Days went by with no sign of the Purple Striped Macaw. Everyone on the boat felt discouraged. Leonardo's anaconda hunt was not going well either. Sofia was getting beautiful shots of every exotic bird except the one they were looking for. Mateo filmed hours of material starring Camilla giving every fact on the new species, but no actual footage of the bird. On a particularly dreary, muggy day the girls were nibbling on fresh fruit, Leonardo was behind the steering wheel, and Mateo was carving a stick on the side of the boat. Leonardo hollered out to Mateo, "You better get off that ledge boy. One little bump and you are somebody's dinner." "The jokes on you, Leonardo," laughed Mateo. "I was a state champion swimmer back in high school." Leonardo just laughed with an evil grin from ear to ear. "You wouldn't parish from drowning my friend," chuckled Leonardo. "You wouldn't even make it to the boat or the shore before they got you." Just then, the boat took a sharp swerve left and Mateo went right off the side into the water. The girls screamed and ran to the edge. "Leonardo, do something," they shouted. Leonardo cut the engine. Everyone could see Mateo treading water about fifty yards behind them. As Leonardo began turning the boat around the girls began to scream again. About twenty yards behind Mateo, gliding along the top of the water, was a huge snake. It was longer than a school bus, with the head the size of a truck tire. "Faster!" screamed Camilla, as Sofia searched for something to throw at Mateo. The boat was about ten yards away from Mateo when Sofia threw a rope in his direction. The snake was getting close. Mateo was moving quickly toward the rope, but the snake was moving faster. Just as the snake reared back its head to strike at Mateo, lifting its giant body out of the water, a loud bang came from behind the girls.

They turned around to see Leonardo standing there holding a shotgun. Mateo reached the boat and climbed back in. Camilla looked straight at Leonardo and said, "Congratulations, you saved my brother's life and got your snake!" Leonardo just shook his head and said, "It does me no good dead." The mood shifted and rain started to fall in buckets. Leonardo said, "We better just keep looking for that bird of yours." As they motored downriver, the thunder got louder and the lightning seemed closer. The heavy rain made it almost impossible to see. Water began slowly leaking into the boat. "Leonardo, the boat is flooding," shouted Camilla. Leonardo looked at her sarcastically. "Leonardo!" Camilla screamed louder. "Leonardo, Leonardo, the boat is flooding!" she screamed. He ignored her. "We've got company," said Leonardo. Camilla and Mateo turned around only to see Sofia facing away from another giant anaconda. "Sofia, behind you!" shouted Mateo, but it was too late. By the time she turned around the snake had already begun wrapping its huge body around her, squeezing her to death. Breaking and crushing every bone in Sofias' body. It was almost happening in slow motion. The snake began swallowing her whole without difficulty then slithered back into the river. Camilla started to cry, and Mateo ran to her side.

It had only been five or ten minutes, the rain was still falling, Camilla was still crying and Mateo was still comforting her when another huge anaconda broke the surface of the water. Mateo and Camilla looked at each other for a slight moment then scanned the boat for Leonardo. "Hold on!" Leonardo shouted, coming from nowhere with the shotgun. The snake stood straight up, out of the water, and was twice as tall as the boat. Leonardo shot but missed. He ran back inside to reload. The snake made its way onto the boat, slithering slowly. As Leonardo ran back out, the snake grabbed him. Leonardo did not die instantly. The snake dragged him underwater a couple times, as if it were playing with its food. Camilla and Mateo stood in shock as they listened to Leonardo scream for help. Leonardo, getting a moment to breathe, slipped his fingers in his pocket and grabbed his pocketknife. Thinking fast, he raised his hand with the pocketknife and sliced the snake's eye open.

Leonardo dropped into the water. The one-eyed snake hissed and thrashed. Camilla grabbed the shotgun and almost got a shot when Leonardo fell back into the boat screaming, "Don't shoot, don't shoot!" Leonardo quickly smacked the gun out of Camilla's hands. The snake was still hissing when Camilla shouted, "Are you crazy? That snake almost killed you!" "Do you know how much that thing is worth alive?" shouted Leonardo. "Still, it almost killed you, and you're worried about getting it out of here alive," argued Camilla. Leonardo grabbed Camillias' throat and started to squeeze. Mateo grabbed the shotgun and pointed it at the giant anaconda. Boom!

The jungle was silent. Leonardo started running at Mateo shouting, “Are you crazy? That was my only chance, and you just killed it!” Leonardo put his hands around Mateos neck. Mateo gasped for air as they both fell onto the deck. Camilla quickly grabbed the shotgun and aimed for Leonardo’s head. Leonardo instantly went limp and blood started gushing from the massive hole in the middle of his forehead. Mateo crawled out from under him. Camilla helped her brother throw Captain Leonardos body overboard. Right at that moment, a Purple Striped Macaw landed on the edge of the boat.

Hattee Deutscher

St. Mary’s Grade School

6th Grade, 3rd Place

The Trouble in Science

“Alexa time to get up!” my mom yelled from downstairs as she is making breakfast.

I never wanted to get up for school, but today was my first day of high school. I was so excited, I quickly got up and throw on my clothes on that I picked out yesterday which were jeans and a black fitted top with Nike shoes, curled my long brown hair and did my makeup, ate breakfast and excitedly left my house to begin this new chapter of life.

As I got to this huge school, this anxiety and anxious nerve hit me, I was so scared I waited in my warm car for a bit. Around five to six minutes later I finally left to go inside. As I walked in, I saw the most beautiful guy in the world, he was tall, had brown curly hair, was wearing athletic clothes, blue eyes, and smelled so good. **Wow what an amazing start to my day** I thought.

I waited in the noisy gym for school to start just hoping the guy I came across would show up again and would be in my same grade. My friends showed up, and I told them that I just saw the most beautiful guy in the world, none of them believed me and they were all confused on who I was talking about. The bell loudly rang just after I was done talking, and me and my friends all walked each other to our classes, and we began our day. Most of the time I was just hoping to have no homework and not get in trouble. My first class was English, I am not the biggest fan of reading and writing, but here I am. My teacher was nice a very pretty.

After class I came across my friends again and gossiped about the people in our class, like most girls do. We had no clue where we were going, and we kept getting stared at, so we just tried to act nonchalant. After around six or seven minutes, just kidding I gotta stop with that brain rot. Anyway, like I was saying, after walking like the whole school I finally found my class, which was algebra, which is one of my least favorite classes of all time, it makes no sense to use letters in math! Like who would do something like that, if I wanted to learn about letters, I would go back to English class, like come on.

“Good morning class.” my teacher said in a teacher-like voice.

“Oh, great this is gonna be an adventure.” I whispered to myself. She just kept talking about how fun this class was gonna be, she was talking so much, I contemplated about taking a nap. I quickly looked at my phone to see what time it was and dosed off into space while I listened to her jabber.

After class none of my friends showed up, so I had to walk by myself. I looked like a lonely shy girl, and if you know me, that is the opposite of what I am. As I am walking in the hallway all I am hearing is,

“Did you hear about...?”

“I can’t believe...!”

“Did you you see what she was wearing...?” and many other random things. High school students are so different than middle school students, most of them matured and some of them look so different than I have seen before. Right as I went into the class, the bell rang. I went to a seat next to this girl who looked really nice, I immediately said “Hi” and she said “Hi, what’s your name?” And we talked the whole class. Her name was Kaylee and we instantly clicked. She was into sports, so was I, she is funny, so am I, and many more things. I finally made a new friend, I was so stoked about that, I did not think I would find someone I would like and someone who had the same energy as me. The bell rang and I left the class,

“Bye Alexa!” Kaylee shouted from across the hall,

“Bye!” I shouted back.

I walked to my next class alone, again, my next class, which was science, which I terrified for. My last years science teacher was so mean and annoying. I slowly walked into this small, gross smelling class praying that

she would not be mean. I sat next to this boy, and I looked up at the board, and she written Mrs. Zwig as big as she could. The guy next to me said,

“Are you scared or is it just me?”

“No, I’m terrified, trust me,” I whispered back.

“Hey class, hope your so excited to be here!” Mrs. Zwig said obnoxiously loud. Me and the guy next to me looked at each other instantly, and we both rolled our eyes. She just kept taking and next thing I hear,

“Is going to be your homework tonight.”

“What did she just say?” I accidentally said aloud,

“I said you will be having homework tonight.” She said in an annoyed way.

I groaned, and she started passing out our homework. When I got it, it said pre-Test.

I quickly pulled out my phone to tell my friends that my teacher just gave us homework. Out of nowhere I hear,

“That is not acceptable to be having your phone out, for a matter of fact, head to the office right now”

“Me?” I shouted confused,

“Yes you!”

I quickly headed to the hallway to find my way to the office. I was shaking in my boots like crazy, I could not believe the first day of school I would get in trouble. As I turned the corner of the long hallway, I saw the guy I saw this morning my jaw dropped, and we looked at each other at the same time!

“Are you lost?” He shouted from across the hallway.

“Yes, I am, actually!” I shouted back.

“Where are you going?” He asked kindly

“I’m trying to find the office,”

“I will show you the way!”

“So why do you have to go to the office?” He asked in a concerned why.

“Well, I pulled out my phone in class to text my friends that I got homework, and she yelled at me and told me to go to the office,”

“Oh, that’s no fun,”

“Yeah, so what’s your name?” I said in a cute way,

“I’m Ben, what’s your name?”

“I’m Alexa, so are you a freshman?”

“Yeah, I am, my older siblings played sports here, so I know my way around here. Well, this is the office, do not worry, they are nice, and just tell them the truth of what happened and they will be nice to you since it is the first day of school.”

“Well nice meeting you, that meant a lot, because I was really scared, thank you!”

“You bet, if you need anything else just find me, it was nice meeting you to. Would you like to grab some coffee tomorrow morning or at some point?”

“Yes, I would love to!” I quickly said

“See you tomorrow, Alexa!”

“Bye!” I said back. **Maybe things do happen for a reason, I thought to myself!**

Brynlee Johnson

Hays Middle School

6th Grade, Honorable Mention

Imagining

I’m standing still, but I can feel the pressure. The pressure of keeping everyone feeling like they matter but still holding up myself. My imagination is quietly there, I myself am growing. But I’m still a kid, I’m still fully there.

My mom let me bring my friends over, and we got to talk. We were laughing the whole time. But those thoughts, they kept haunting me. The thoughts about the letter. Just thinking about it gives me shivers, gives me goosebumps. I haven’t told anyone, just kept it a secret for the last two months or so. You would think that I would’ve got over it and read it already. But I just can’t.

I still haven't said anything about the letter, not a word. At least not out loud. But now I can speak out into the space that is so quiet. The Attic. I designed it, with pillows, posters, and my special snacks, and I can't believe that I can hear myself think. Even my dog, Daisy, is quiet. Now, the letter is the worst thing that has ever happened to me, at least in my head. The letter is from The Manager of Imagination. I know that was dramatic, but I'm thirteen years old. I'm a teenager. My imagination is not so... imaginative anymore. I don't know what the Manager wants to do with me, but I have a feeling it's not so great. But right now I can't think about the letter.

Even though I haven't told anyone, I can't keep the feeling of pressure out. If I open it, something bad can happen. If I don't open it, something bad will happen. The pressure of the letter was greater than the pressure of keeping everyone up. I stare at the letter, worn out even though I haven't touched it more than once. It sat on my desk in the attic. There was no stamp, address, or a return address. Just my name in recognizable handwriting, and the Manager's. Was this just a joke, or was it real? The Manager of Imagination, it just taunts me to think about it. Was this a test I was already failing?

I figured that the suspense had to be worse than the reality, so I reached out my hand, paused, and brushed it with my finger. I pulled back my hand sharply. Then, a second later, I quickly grabbed the envelope and tore it open. Then, my mom barged in, and gave that look someone gives you when they know you are up to something. She slowly closed the door, eyeing me as she went. I went back to my letter after being rudely interrupted, and I read the message on the front, "Open only if you are 13 years old." I said, "It's now or never," and I carefully examined what it had to say. It read, "I realize your imagination is evolving, so this next stage will be hard. Don't think badly of yourself or be scared. Meet me through the door in your closet at 10 p.m. Don't be late."

Wow. This can't be real. All of my stress for this? At least it doesn't have anything to do with challenges, such as logic puzzles or sports knowledge. I can finally relax, until tonight. What is he going to make me do? I went downstairs, said hello to my mom, and my older sister, Sophia, who is 16 years old, stopped me. She brought me to her room, very pink and stylish, and looked at me. She whispered, "I know what the first task is. You have to try to make a dinosaur have pink glasses and heart shaped necklaces." I don't know how she found out that I got my letter or why she is telling me, but I said, "Thanks." I was ready.

That night, more nervous than ever, I went to my closet, now dark, and scary because of the new scratching of hangers and the coolness of air. The silence was broken by my heavy breathing. I went back through my clothes, and found the door. I went through it, and there were spiders literally everywhere! There weren't any dinosaurs, so she was wrong! I hate spiders with every fiber of my body, so I wanted to turn back. They had needle-like legs, with hair all over and hundreds of eyes which glittered in the moonlight. There was a faint scuttling sound which came from the legs of the hairy monsters. My heart was beating against my ribs. And then a booming voice traveled across the room, saying, "Your first challenge of imagination is to turn these spiders into something more appealing." I already decided to give them less hair and legs, because those creep me out. I imagined it. I closed my eyes, calmed down, pictured the spiders with less hair and stylish accessories, and their limbs shrunk, they had less hair, and they had pink sunglasses on top of their now smooth head. I know it only took about two seconds, but it felt like two weeks. I thought it wouldn't be so hard after all.

The second challenge was fairly easy, too. All I had to do was imagine I was somewhere (I chose to go to my bed, of course), and I was there. I felt the cold damp air of my closet go away, and in its place came the smell of coffee and moldy bananas. I ended up in the kitchen so I had to try again. I finally ended up in my warm and comforting bed. The third and final task was the hardest. I had to imagine myself in the future and see what I would be doing. It took a few tries, but I got it. It was like looking through a kaleidoscope of colors and shapes looking at myself in dreams I haven't even dreamt of. I could see myself in my bed, I could look into my future mind. I saw Harry Potter, I saw my family, and I even saw my dog, Daisy. Then I came back to the empty room I was in to begin with. It was finally over. It was not as terrible as it could've been. Even though I was done, The Manager still had something to say. He boomed, and his voice echoed throughout the entire room, "You have been certified as an imaginative teenager. I never doubted it, considering your whole family were and still are." I looked everywhere with glittering eyes, feeling happy with what I accomplished.

And then I woke up.

Jade Whitmer

Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High
6th Grade, Honorable Mention

Intertwined and Soul-bound

I open the door from my garage and walk into the kitchen. The parakeet I'm fostering greets me, loudly.

"*Tough love?*" Jormungandr's voice asks in my mind. He's an elegant, iridescent white serpent with soul-piercing green eyes. His name is his father's. I laugh.

"I thought this one would be it. He found out that I do wildlife rehab and dropped me then and there." It was a wreck of a date. Jormungandr wraps himself around my arm when I pick him up.

"*You're tired, Hera.*" He butts his nose against my neck. I sigh because I know that I still need to clean up my animal sanctuary before tomorrow. I scoop up the parakeet and get ready to work.

I wake up to my phone's ringtone. It's nearly 11:30 AM.

"*It's your friend.*" Jormungandr nudges the phone with his nose. I pick it up.

"Hey Hera. Wanna go out tonight? Tanner and Melly are coming too." Claudia is a social butterfly. It's what I like about her.

"I'm free anytime after 3:30," I say.

"Great! We'll carpool and pick you up at 6:00." I can hear the happiness in Claudia's voice as I say goodbye and hang up.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed and go to shower. My body feels foggy and exhausted.

"*Hera, go easy on yourself,*" Jormungandr whispers.

It's 2:00 PM when the co-proprietor of the local animal shelter shows up to take a freshly adopted kitten off my hands. The man is wearing a traveler's cloak, and he has auburn hair with licks of grey. As we walk through my sanctuary, he takes special interest with an aggressive bobcat kitten.

"Her eyes are gorgeous, but there looks to be something wrong," he says. Cautiously I reach out to check her over. She lashes out and bites down on my hand, hard, before huddling in the corner of her open crate. My breath hitches as the pain arcs through my hand. The wound hurts more than the usual bites and bleeds thick crimson.

"Yeesh!" I wince.

"Are you alright?" the proprietor asks, concern leaks into his voice. I nod. The man helps me wrap my hand with gauze. Then I get the newly adopted kitten ready to go to her new family. After the man leaves, I go to get Jormungandr. When I wake him up, he looks at my hand, worried.

"I'm fine, Jormungandr," I say.

"*If you say so.*"

I walk outside with Jormungandr coiled around my arm. Melly, Tanner, and Claudia grin when I get in the car and Melly coos over Jormungandr before tapping him on the nose. He lets her because she's not obnoxious and it makes her laugh.

"*You need to tell them about me at some point,*" Jormungandr says. Melly, Tanner, Claudia, and I don't keep many secrets, but this is one I'm not ready to tell them. Jormungandr knows that.

We arrive at the bar and walk in after showing the bouncer our IDs. Melly makes a beeline for the dance floor and I follow. After an hour passes, I start to feel faint. I pass it off as the alcohol, but I feel like I'm asleep and awake at the same time. Jormungandr starts urging me to sit down. Pain from my hand strikes through my body like lightning. This time, it strikes my heart and my pulse buffers. It hurts and soon I panic as dread builds. My pulse buffers again and slows as my vision swims. I don't see Tanner approach and I can't hear him. My legs go limp and I collapse. He barely catches me. Everything goes black and visions of a vaguely familiar god dropping dead in front of a giant snake fill my head.

I wake up in a hospital room. Claudia helps me sit up and asks the nurse if it's safe to take off the oxygen mask. The nurse nods and asks if I'm okay with that. I nod.

"Do you feel like you can breathe, Hera?" the nurse asks. Her name tag says her name is Emily.

"Yeah," I say. My head feels like someone hit me with a truck. A feeling of nausea fills my body, and I put my hand to my mouth. I swallow the bile in my throat as Melly presses a cold, wet washcloth to my head. It helps, a lot.

"Miss Emily, could you leave us alone for a moment?" Tanner asks. Emily walks out of the hospital room.

"Where's Jormungandr?" I can't keep my fear from seeping into my voice.

"Right here," Claudia says. She holds out Jormungandr and I let him coil up against my chest.

"*The man who showed up to take the kitten... You said he was there when the bobcat bit you. I believe that he poisoned you when he bandaged your hand,*" Jormungandr says.

"Why," I ask, not caring that my friends were listening.

“Because this poison is Aesirian poison. You said he was wearing a traveler’s cloak and was middle-aged.”

“So that was Magni,” I say. My friends look at me like I’m crazy. “Magni is one of Thor’s two children that survived Ragnarok. Jormungandr is named after his father,” I say.

“So Jormungandr is immortal and hunted down by Magni. Why?” Tanner asks.

“Jormungandr’s father killed Thor during Ragnarok. Is that right?” Melly asks. I nod.

“Jormungandr can speak in my mind because my family, my lineage, is tied to his life. Jormungandr has said that Magni bound him to my family because it would be easier to kill a family than a god-like snake,” I stop and let them absorb the information. Jormungandr nuzzles against me protectively. “Did they try to take Jormungandr?” I ask.

“Nope, they never even saw him,” Claudia says.

The doctors discharge me five days later. Everything hurts, but at least I can keep food down and walk around on my own. I feel like I’ll recover relatively quickly. That night, Claudia, Tanner, and Melly take me out to dinner at a Tex-Mex place we like. After we order drinks, a middle-aged man comes up and takes the fifth seat at the table. He takes a Ouroboros charm from his cloak. Jormungandr shifts to look at him cautiously. The charm has Norse runes that I recognize as Elder Futhark. □□□□□□. I don’t know how I know, but it means protection and defense of myself and those I love, happiness, stability, joy, mortality and pain, and growth. I realized that he was wishing me protection, knowledge, and the pain that will bring pleasure.

“In my rage and grief, I misunderstood. Jormungandr’s life no longer relies on the life of your lineage, though your family, biological or not, will keep every piece of knowledge and the ability to converse with him. I pray you can forgive me for my actions. Goodbye, Hera. Good luck,” Magni says. He stands and takes his leave. I laugh and put the charm in my pocket.

May Midgard have mercy on my soul.

Ryleigh Kuehl

Hays Middle School

7th Grade, 1st Place

Feeding on Fear

By late 2013, Alexis Hayes had spent three years as an intern at the Lawrence Police Department, mostly trying to survive the icy glare of the up-tight coroner, Jennifer O’Brien. Alexis was perceptive - a trait that usually served her well - but it became a curse the morning Jennifer handed her a file on a "John Doe."

The victim’s insides had been liquified. The only clue was a blue handprint on his forearm, sitting there like a morbid tattoo. No DNA. No fingerprints. Just a hollowed-out man and a feeling of impending doom that made the break-room coffee taste even more like cardboard than usual.

As Alexis prepared to clock out, she spotted two "FBI agents" in Jennifer’s office: a man with roughly calloused hands, and a nervous redhead. She recognized their aliases immediately—Agents Ripley and Hicks from Aliens.

“Nice fakes," Alexis challenged them in the hallway when they caught her listening in, her heart hammering against her ribs. "The texture is off, and the serial numbers don't exist."

The man grinned, strangely impressed. "Very perceptive. I’ll be sure to fix that... I’m Dean Winchester. This is Charlie." He gestured to the redhead.

When Alexis asked him what they were doing, impersonating an FBI agent, Dean didn’t try to maintain the lie. Instead, he dropped the truth—because they thought that Alexis was one they could trust. Monsters were real. They were hunting a Djinn—the thing that had turned the John Doe into a human puddle. Alexis laughed, calling them mental, but the gaze that Dean gave her proved her wrong. Later, she retreated to the safety of her apartment, wanting to forget everything she’d heard...

But the supernatural has a way of sticking to those who know about it. That night, a nagging sense of professional duty—and a fear of Jennifer’s temper—drove Alexis back to the morgue to file the report she’d forgotten about. There, she found the Winchesters, including Dean’s brother Sam, a man so tall he reminded her of a moose, sneaking around the bodies.

“Jennifer’s coming!" Alexis hissed, her instincts overriding her common sense. She shoved their bags—which were thankfully closed—into their arms and ushered them into a ventilation duct, giving them directions to the alleyway. Once they were safe, she made her getaway. But after that, the world felt tilted to Alexis.

Alexus arrived at her apartment to find her books alphabetized and her things tidied—a terrifyingly polite sign of a break-in. Then came the call from Sam. His voice was ragged, punctuated by a heavy cough, confirming the thought that he was sick.

"Jennifer O'Brien... she was the Djinn," Sam said after catching his breath. "We got her, but she got to Charlie first. Charlie's dying, Alexis. Her insides are starting to turn. We need African Dream Root, and we need it now."

Alexus froze. She didn't want to be a hero; she wasn't one. But the image of the nervous redhead who liked Aliens flashed in her mind. "There's a shop," Alexis said, grabbing her keys. "The Wiccan's Web. I'll get it."

She didn't wait for a key—instead, she used a bobby pin and a prayer to pick the shop's lock, frantically searching through jars of herbs until she found the twig-like roots labeled African Dream Root. She drove to the coordinates Sam sent, tires screaming against the pavement, and burst into a run-down shack.

Inside, she saw Jennifer—or rather, not Jennifer, for she was truly a Djinn—lying on the floor with a stab wound, dead. And Charlie, who was sitting in a metal chair, unconscious, her face pale and glistening with sweat. Sam was too sick from the Djinn's encounter to enter the dream world, and Dean needed to watch the perimeter.

"I'll go," Alexis said. Before they could protest, she downed a concoction of the roots, water, and a strand of Charlie's hair for DNA. It tasted like gasoline and expired whiskey, but it did the trick, because Alexis woke up in a military office, dressed in a stiff uniform. The air smelled of ozone and old blood. She found Charlie in a corridor, clutching a double-barrel shotgun and blasting away at "zombies" that disintegrated into ash.

"Welcome to The Red Scare," Charlie said, her eyes wide with a mix of adrenaline and terror. "My favorite video game from when I was twelve. It's a loop. It never ends."

They fought their way to a nurse's station where a woman lay on a ventilator. It was Charlie's mother. Alexis watched as the "fun, quirky" hunter she'd met at the morgue broke down. This wasn't just a dream; it was a prison of guilt. Charlie had been reliving the car accident that killed her parents every time she closed her eyes for years.

"Charlie, listen to me," Alexis said, stepping between Charlie and the approaching digital monsters. "The Djinn feeds on this. It wants you to stay here until there's nothing left of you. You were twelve years old. You called your parents because you were scared and felt unsafe. That isn't a crime - it's being aware."

"If I hadn't called, they'd be alive," Charlie said, fighting back tears.

"And if you don't let go, we both die right here," Alexis countered, her voice softening. "Say goodbye, Char. For real this time."

With a shaking hand, Charlie turned to the woman in the bed. She whispered the words she'd held back for over a decade. The walls of the military base began to shimmer and dissolve like salt in water.

Alexus gasped as she sat up in the shack, the dusty air filling her lungs. Beside her, Charlie opened her eyes, breathing hard but alive. The "liquefaction" had stopped.

A few hours later, the sun began to peek over the horizon. The black, 1967 Impala sat idling in the dirt, a beautiful, growling relic.

"Sure, you won't come with us?" Charlie asked, leaning against the car. "We could use another girl—especially one who knows how to pick locks."

Alexus looked at her beat-up Toyota Camry, then back at the trio of hunters. Jennifer was dead, her internship was over, and the world was far more dangerous than she had ever imagined. But she wasn't ready to trade her textbooks for a sawed-off shotgun just yet.

"I've got a degree to finish," Alexis said with a tired smile. "And a very messy apartment to actually clean myself this time."

Sam walked over, looking slightly better but still leaning heavily on the car. "Thanks, Alexis. If you ever find yourself in a corner, you can't talk your way out of... call us."

Instead of a handshake, Alexis reached out and pulled the "Moose" into a hug and gave him a small kiss. She waved as the Impala roared to life and disappeared down the backroads of Kansas. She was still just an intern with a mountain of student debt, but as she climbed into her Camry, she kept the Winchesters' number tucked firmly in her pocket.

So, monsters were real. But for the first time in years, Alexis wasn't afraid of the dark.

Mila Womack
Hays Middle School
7th Grade, 2nd Place

The New Role

There I was, sitting in the doctor's office holding back tears. It was September 1, 2023. I had just been told I would be missing my first three football games. All of my hard work in practice, all of the reading over plays I did, and now, because of injury, when I got back, I might not have either of my starting jobs at all.

I had just broken my finger the day before, August 31 to be exact, at football practice. Now, both my linebacker and right tackle spots would be occupied by other players for the first three weeks. I decided that since I wanted to win so badly, I was going to do my best to help them with the position. Abe Cadoret, who was new to tackle football but had a lot of potential, would take my tackle spot. Logan Dorzweiler would fill my linebacker position. During the scrimmage the next week on Monday, I warmed up with the team, and then we ran offensive plays. After we ran 43 counter, I realized Abe wasn't supposed to be pulling, but he was. Since the coaches didn't catch this, I made sure to try and help Abe out.

"Abe, That was a great pull, but since you are now a tackle, you won't pull on counter," I explained. He nodded, and did it right the next time. He had most plays down and knew his job on almost every play by the end of the night.

That Saturday, we played Hutchinson. Abe had his responsibilities down at that point, but he was just hitting his guy and would stop his block.

"Hey Abe," I explained. "Great job on your blocks. You are hitting them in the mouth hard and often. But, you've got to keep driving them back after first contact. You're kind of just hitting them once then letting them go. Keep getting that good initial hit, but then get your arms extended and push them back."

"Okay," Abe responded. I hit him on the helmet and he played way better the rest of the game.

After one successful game at linebacker, Logan was struggling in the second game versus Andale, which had a back way bigger than Logan. There were multiple occasions where he shied away from contact.

"Logan," I said. "You've got to go out there and hit someone. Don't be scared of contact. Hit that back low and hit him hard. He may be bigger and taller, but you have the bigger heart," I said before hitting his pads. "Hit him hard, and he'll start slowing down," I finished.

That seemed to get him fired up. At the start of the third quarter, we had them on a fourth and two. They ran the ball right at Logan, but he wasn't going anywhere. Logan hit him in the backfield for a three yard loss.

"Yeah!" I yelled. "Great hit Logan!" Although we lost 13-0, Logan had a great second half.

After one more loss to McPherson, I came back and played the rest of the season. We ended up 5-2 on the season, and both Logan and Abe ended up having great seasons. Abe moved to full time starting right tackle (they moved me to left tackle), and Logan came in whenever he needed to, and he played well whenever he was in the game. I was very happy I was a good enough teammate to help them become better at their new positions. This helped me realize that even if you aren't a coach, you can still help make someone better.

Kash Wendland

*Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High
7th Grade, 3rd Place*

The Silent Rebellion

The world of Willowbrook was decided at first breath. A red mark meant a life full of never-ending chores and work. Forced labor and no rest. A black mark meant the superior group, authority, and control. As a secret and forbidden friendship forms between Kale and Elara, they discover a hidden history of equality and fellowship.

Kale spent his days in the mines, his forehead bearing the crimson red mark that identified him as a laborer. He only knew the strict rules enforced by the black-marked, who governed with absolute authority. Elara, living in the elegant upper city bore the black mark, yet hated the stern, unbending expectations of her kind. Private schooling, a strict clothing policy, and the final, most important rule. Never ever speak to the lessers.

They met in the Gray Zone, a neglected natural space where the city's restrictions blurred. Initially, it was a mistake—a shared shelter from a rainstorm—but soon, it became a necessary escape. The Gray Zone was their sanctuary. Elara brought Kale books forbidden to his kind, and Kale shared the raw, vibrant, and forbidden art of the undercity with her. Together, they learned Willowbrook was once a safe place. Everyone was treated the same, no matter their mark.

Their bond was dangerous, companionship between marks was punishable by exile or death. Yet they continued, realizing the myths they were taught were lies designed to keep the world divided. Together, they sought to bridge the gap between their worlds, risking everything to prove that their friendship was more powerful than the marks they were born with.

Charlotte Mergen
Hays Middle School
7th Grade, Honorable Mention

Lost One

The snow began as a whisper. Fine flakes drifted down from a dull gray sky, setting onto the frozen earthy ash. The boy "Unci" (which means lost one in the wakan language) had only noticed it after his eyelashes had begun to stick together.

Unci is 17 years old and has a good enough figure he can help provide for his tribe. Hungrier than piranhas, they clinged to their camp waiting for a miracle to happen, but again and again the hunters from his tribe came back empty-handed.

Unci, after countless days of being hungry, offered to help so at least he could commit to something and after a talk with the Elders, he could finally be sent out to hunt. With a spear and bag in hand, they let out a new hunter.

The land stretched endlessly around him, white and silent. The tall pines stood stiff, their branches heavy and unmoving, but below was Unci following some hare tracks, careful not to make a noise. The wind had soon erased it as it never existed. Feeling hopeless, he kept moving onward. As the snow thickened and the world shrank so that the only thing he could see was his feet, not even the burning of his ears and cheeks would stop him. He pressed on as turning back empty-handed and felt worse than the cold biting into his fingernails.

The storm arrived suddenly from behind, like an animal springing from cover. The wind howled through the trees, ripping the remaining heat from his body. Now spinning in circles around him, blinding him, Unci tried to turn back, but every direction looked the same. Panic crept into his chest as he shouted out his tribe's name to no response as it was being swallowed whole by the storm.

Hours or minutes passed, but snow doesn't keep track of time. When the storm finally loosened, the silence felt even heavier, but as the sky darkened into the early night and the cold deepened, Unci forced himself to stand as he knew stopping meant never standing up again. So he chose to stand up and walk.

As the forests grew denser and the shadows twisted between the trees, an unfamiliar smell rippled throughout the trees. Then he heard it - a long, low howl.

It wasn't close, but it wasn't far either. Unci's heart raced; his people were part of this land, but the wolves were, too. The elders said, "They were not evil, just hungry," but that never made him feel better.

Unci climbed onto a rocky rise, gripping his spear tightly as he tried to make himself look bigger just as he had been taught. His breath came out white and cloudy, but as the dark shapes moved between the trees gracefully, he started to move back slowly but the icy ground made it hard to walk, making him fall.

The wolves circled in at a distance not rushing but waiting for Unci. He struggled to his knees, but the exhaustion was dragging him down slowly. He thought of the food he never found, of the tribe that would wait for him for days, but that day will never come. Oh, how small he felt beneath the trees and the endless sky.

The tears on his cheeks froze, though he didn't feel it from the cold numbing his body. His fear softened into something quieter. He pressed his hand into the snow as the wind brushed against his buzzy mustache, carrying the smell of pine and fresh ice into his nose.

Nevertheless, they closed in on Unci. As they closed in, he held onto the last bit of breath that kept him warm. By morning the land remained unchanged and indifferent as the pale sun bleached the hare from the sunrise.

In the end, we are all animals. Whether you're a small weasel or a full-fledged human, we do what we do best, try to survive.

Jose Lopez-Rodriguez
Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High
8th Grade, 1st Place

Fractured Fairy Tale

My faded tennis shoe catches on something in the yard, sending me face-first to the dirt of the dog pen.

"Great way to start a Monday," I mutter to myself. I roll over, ribs smarting at the pressure release. I groan as I sit up, dirt thickly covering my shirt, grass peppering my legs. I look down at my tripping hazard. A small, rusted bar is half in the ground. I stand up and start to walk away, but curiosity gets the best of me, and I lean over to unearth a small skeleton key. It's rusty and rough. I examine it in my hands. On the bow of the key is a large circle, an open, metal book in the center. I slip the key in my pocket, letting my imagination run wild as I walk to school. Like always, when I finally get to school, I'm half asleep again. Even though the key is light, it burns a hole through my pocket. As we walk into English, my teacher seems over eccentric, quickly explaining a trip to the library. I go through the movements, only half listening to Mrs. Schneider. Barely five minutes later, we file onto the bus liked cramped sardines. I sit in seat eight like always, back against the glass, feet on the seat. I hiss slightly as the cold metal and glass seep through my thin shirt. Goosebumps race up my back and raise the hair on my neck. The driver rambles about the safety precautions, as if we weren't in 8th grade and haven't been taking trips like this for nine years. I let my head rest against the glass as the brakes sibilate, jerking the bus into motion. I pull the key I found earlier out of my pocket and study it in my hands again. I trace the open pages, turning it over to look at the cover. "'The Wizard of Oz' by L. Frank Baum," I murmur to myself. The bus screeches as it pulls over in the parking spot. I slip the key back into my pocket, the metal cool against my skin. Mrs. Schnee ushers us out with frantic hands. I slip out of my seat and follow the group. As we get into the library, I beeline to the fantasy section. It may be a cheesy, classic genre, but it makes me forget reality. I skim for almost ten minutes with no luck. I turn around the corner, an unfamiliar sight catching my peripheral vision. Next to me stands an ornately decorated, faded double door. The wood looks heavy. The handle is split between the two doors, a large open book, each half as a different handle.

"Woah," I breathe out, taking it in. The book looked familiar. I walk up, letting my hand brush the engraved fake lettering. I wrap my fingers around the edge of the cold, smooth metal. I pull. The door thuds. *Locked*. I pull again, the same effect. I ignore the feeling of over-familiarity in my stomach at the look of the door. I find a book and leave with my class. The rest of the day the image of the door is still tattooed behind my eyelids. The final bell rings, and I hurry out. I walk home, fidgeting with the rusted key I found earlier. My feet grow their own brain, absentmindedly taking me to the library. *It couldn't hurt to try the key, right?* I open the library doors and walk straight to the book door. I slip the Skeleton key into the hole. I readjust my grip and turn it. It opens with a *chink*. I take a deep breath, steeling myself, as I pull the heavy door open. I step through, closing the door behind me, and re-pocketing the key. The smell of old, dusty books hits me like a semi-truck, poignant and staunch. Around me are shelves upon shelves upon shelves of dusty classics. All the greats surround me. I walk, aimlessly gazing upon them. I grab one at random. *'Romeo and Juliet'*— Shakespeare. I grin, cracking the spine, when suddenly, the world tilts, a whooshing sound floods me. I land, cold, moist grass under my knees and shins.

"What the—" I start, looking around. I'm outside, a mansion in front of me. It's cool outside and even though there is a young man directly in front of me, he doesn't notice me. A young girl stands on the balcony, longingly looking over the marble railing. She wears a Shakespearean era costume, as does the man, on the ground calling up to her.

"But soft! what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun," the man calls. I watch, jaw agape, as the second act of *Romeo and Juliet* unfurls before my very eyes. I feel the key, heavy in my palm as I stand up. I walk between the two. Although the scene. neither of them seeing me. I look around, seeing a bearded figure in the bushes grinning. I lock eyes with the figure, although he isn't watching me, he is watching the scene. I finish the scene and start backing away. *I have to be going crazy, delusional, that's the only explanation for me seeing this. How do I get home?* I start to spiral, panicking as I get lost further, exploring the city of Fair Verona, aimlessly, invisible. I slide down against a brick house. The key still clutched like a vice in my hand. I still don't know how to go home. I curl my knees into my chest; my eyes filling up.

"I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go home," I repeat shakily. A light glows below my feet, glittery and gold. I look up, watching it swirl around my body as I stand up. The light pauses when I stop talking.

"I want to go home," I repeat. It stirs, circling again, like a cat overly excited to see an owner. I sniff, wiping my eyes. I repeat the sentence again and again, until suddenly the golden glow envelops me, a cool calm settling. I squeeze my eyes shut. Suddenly, its silent, except for the faint sounds of a cat purring. I feel a soft, squishy surface under my right side, a fluffy blanket pulled around my waist, my cat, Shadow, curled into my stomach, purring softly. I look around at my dark room. I pull my lamp string, filling the room with a soft glow. The book key is still on my nightstand. I check the date. It's been a whole day since my... dream? It seemed so real. I

sigh. Assuming my imagination got the better of me again. I pull my lamp back off and then I see it. My shoes have the same gold glitter dusting them that whooshed me back to my house. I grin. I knew it. It wasn't a dream at all. In fact, it was all real. I let myself lull back to sleep, imagining where tomorrow's book choice will lead me. *Maybe Narnia, Terabithia, Oz, Middle Earth...*

Brittany Schmeidler
Hays Middle School
8th Grade 2nd Place

New World

I pushed my foot down on one pedal, one after another. The sun was shining on my face, the wind slightly blowing. I'd just started biking home from my paper route; man, I loved my job. Just as I turned the corner, my mood shifted to annoyance. I saw Keith, Ashea, and a couple other of my friends walking to the dance hall.

"Hey, Liam!" Keith yelled to me. "How was another morning trapped in the routes?"

"Horrible, as usual," I yell back with my usual sense of guilt.

I'm honestly a really popular guy who is treated like some sort of hero, the way I trash talk people and just about everything that has to do with our little isle. The worst part about all of this is that I love our country, and I usually don't mean half the things I say about people.

Suddenly, I felt raindrops hit my face; it felt refreshing after a long day, but I didn't want to get wet, so I hurried home.

Once I began to approach my house, something was off. My usually bustling house with the radio blasting news of the war was silent.

"Mum? Da? I'm home!" I shouted upon entering.

I waited for a response but heard only quiet, muffled sounds. I crept up the stairs as the once-muffled sounds turned into sobs from Mother and Father's room. I began walking back down the hall to my room when I heard my mother and father's door open.

"Liam, come in," Father said calmly. "We need to talk to you."

I feared what was to come. I crept into the dimly-lit room and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Liam, it was an extremely last minute decision, but... we're leaving," Father said to me.

"What do you mean?" I asked out of genuine confusion.

"We have to leave. Not just Dublin, but Ireland itself," my father said with guilt filling his eyes. "Your mother and I don't think it's safe anymore. We're leaving tomorrow for the SS Navemar."

I couldn't comprehend what I'd just heard. I was overwhelmed with feelings of guilt, fear, sadness, and desperate grief. Everything I had ever known was here.

"Why?!? Why are you doing this to me?" I cried. I put my head into my hands to try to catch my breath while Mother rubbed my back.

"You need to understand that being Christian comes with the risk of persecution, and that is happening now," my father said, desperation filling his whole being.

I wanted to understand, but I couldn't. My head was reeling with questions, and my mind was trying to convince myself this was all a dream.

"We're headed for the New World, America," Father said. "It's filled with new people and freedom from all persecution."

I calmly stood up from the bed, and without saying another word, walked out of my parents' room and into my own. I was numb. I would never see these people again; not my friends, boss, or teachers. I picked up the telephone and dialed Ashea.

"What's buzzin', cousin?" Ashea said chaotically.

I caved and told him everything.

"Damn, that must suck," I heard Ashea say through the phone, with something that almost felt sincere. He continued, "But you finally get off this little isle, away from your job and all the people at school."

There it was. I knew Ashea couldn't be completely sincere about anything.

"Yeah," I said, sounding like I was laughing, but inside I was really uncomfortable, "Just about everything here is small, even the whole country. In America, everything is bigger and better."

“That’s the spirit!” Ashea said, laughing.

I had to start packing, so we hung up. I grabbed all of my clothes and folded them neatly into my bags and grabbed toiletries. To my surprise, they all fit into one bag.

After packing, I laid down on my bed and drifted off to sleep.

Beep,beep,beep. I opened my eyes to rays of sunlight peeking through my blinds. I slowly pulled myself out of bed and remembered what was happening today. I washed my face and brushed my teeth, knowing Father expected me to be ready to go. I walked down the stairs with my bags. Father was outside with the car. I packed my bags along with the others.

Mother sat in the front seat while Father drove, so I sat alone in the back, watching everything through the window. We finally approached the harbor where our ship was docked. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of other immigrants from all different places. Standing in front of us was a girl that looked only a bit younger than myself. She turned around and our eyes met.

She said kindly, “My name is Miriam. What’s yours?”

“Pleasure to meet you, Miriam,” I said politely. “My name is Liam.”

“What a wonderful name,” she said. “Are you nervous?”

“Very much so,” I said genuinely.

“As am I,” she said.

I could hear a man on the deck of the ship telling each of the families where to go aboard the ship.

“Three down,” the man said.

We walked to the left. This ship was enormous, but it was a grimy black colour with a Spanish flag painted on the side. We walked down to our room which only had two twin beds for the three of us. Just as we began to unpack, there was a knock at the door. Mother got up to answer it, and standing in the doorway, was Miriam.

“Hello there,” Mother said. “How can I help you?”

“Hello ma’am,” Miriam replied. “I was wondering if I could possibly borrow Liam for a moment.”

“Of course,” Mother replied, smiling. “Liam! Your friend’s here!”

I walked to the doorway to meet Miriam in the hall, where she beckoned me to follow her. She made her way up to the stairs and onto the main deck. The ship had already taken off, and there was clear, blue water all around us. We walked to the front of the ship and leaned over the rail. It was beautiful, the sun shining off the water. While we stood, neither said a word, yet the silence felt natural.

“I’m assuming you’re from Ireland?” Miriam asked.

“Yes. Where are you from?” I replied.

“I’m from Germany, but I too am escaping religious persecution,” she answered with sadness in her eyes.

We talked for what felt like hours.

“If there’s one thing I would say,” Miriam said after my stories, “it’s that this is going to be so much better for you.”

“Well,” I replied, “if there’s one person who has helped change my outlook on life, it’s you.”

She smiled. She really was a person of few words. I looked back out into the ocean, not the same person I was before.

The next few weeks weren’t all wonderful. People got ill, some even perished. We all carried on in hope that the new world would bring its many promises. Over the weeks that passed, Miriam and I became the best of friends.

It was a Tuesday morning. I woke up and went upstairs to the main deck to meet Miriam at the front of the ship.

“Look,” Miriam said, pointing at something in the distance, “home.”

As I looked at the sight of the new world, I no longer thought of despair but of the opportunities that were sure to come.

Shea Goddard McGuirk

Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High
8th Grade, 3rd Place (tie)

From My Point of View

I sat in my living room, patiently waiting. My bag sat beside me, one of the straps dangling off of the side of the couch. I looked at my phone; the time seemed to be frozen in place. Eventually I got up, making my way to the fridge to grab a drink of water. Almost rhythmically as I had set my hand on the cup, a small chime came from my phone back in the living room. I rushed over to finally see the long-awaited text. It was from Grandma and read a simple, "I'm here."

I grabbed my bag and raced out to the driveway. There they were, my grandparents. I had waited all summer to go on my yearly trip to visit my cousin, Josh, who lived two hours from me in a nice neighborhood around a lake. I ran out to the car, greeting my grandparents while I threw my bag in the seat next to me.

"Hi!" I blurted out, my voice couldn't contain my excitement.

"How are you, Dominic?" My grandpa asked while chuckling, slowly backing out of the driveway.

"I couldn't be more excited!" I practically shouted. After all, it wouldn't be long before I saw Josh.

Josh is two years older than me and has short black hair, which is always slightly ruffled. We drove up the driveway, and I practically jumped out of the car the second I heard my Grandpa shift into park.

"Hey, Josh!" I shouted eagerly, walking up the driveway with my backpack.

"Hey," he quickly responded. "How have you been?"

"Great! What's the plan for this weekend?" My mind flooded with pictures of all the fun we could have.

"Tomorrow we're probably going to do water skiing. For tonight, though, we'll go out to eat." On pen and paper, this was a great plan; however, I've never water skied.

"Sounds great!" Regardless of my capability when going high speeds on water, I was still going to make the most of this trip.

That night we went to get food with Josh's dad, David. When we got home Josh showed me the room we'd be staying in. It was a room with three things: an Xbox, TV, and bunk bed. It was simple but comfortable. I took the top bunk, staring at the ceiling with anticipation for tomorrow.

"This is going to be great," I said down to Josh as my eyes shut and I fell asleep.

The next morning I woke up to Josh sitting up on his bottom bunk.

"Josh, what happens if you fall off the back of a jet ski?" I asked more out of concern than curiosity.

"A lot could happen. You could break an arm," the news hit me like a truck. It should be alright though, I just have to hold on, right?

From the back door of the house, as we made our way into the backyard, I saw it - the jet ski. I suppose that it was only at that moment I finally understood what I signed up for. Before a proper thought could form in my mind, Josh asked, "Wanna go get changed and ride?" He smirked. I wanted to ride, but I still remembered the fact that I could break my arm doing this. My hands squirmed in my pockets.

"Sure," I responded. What was I thinking? I went inside and changed into a swimsuit and lifejacket. When I went back outside, Josh was already putting gas in the jet ski.

"Come on, Dominic!" he shouted from the dock. As I walked up, he started backing it out. I got on the back anxiously, my feet touched the lake's water. I gripped onto the side handles of the jet ski, my knuckles turned white. My breathing sped up.

"You ready?" he shouted over the jet ski's motor.

"Yes!" I choked out. I could hardly finish the word before he took off.

"Are you trying to kill me?" I hollered over the sound of us bouncing over ripples on the water. I heard him laugh; he knew I was joking.

After about three minutes that felt like the most entertaining torture of my life, I saw David calling us into shore. I was saved. Josh precisely pulled us into the dock where David was standing.

"You boys wanna try water skiing?" he asked, directing the question towards me.

"Sure, right now?" I was for the first time starting to actually feel excited about going on the jet ski.

"I don't see why not," he smiled as he went over to the shed and pulled out a long, rectangular box. Within minutes the rope was tied on and the water skis were on Josh's feet. The plan was simple, David was going to drive while I spotted Josh. I was going to spot him by sitting backwards on the jet ski, holding onto the side handles which were ironically too thick to get a good grip.

Josh gave the thumbs up and we were going. I tightened my grip hard enough on the handles for my palms to turn white. After about a minute, I finally realized that Josh was letting go of the rope.

"He's off!" I yelled over my shoulder to David. David shifted the handles as far right as they would go and my left hand slipped. My side dangled over the water as my right hand fully supported me. I quickly remembered

Josh's words, praying he was joking about breaking an arm. As the weight of my side leaned on my right arm, I slipped. I crashed into the water, my right ankle kicking my left thigh. The jet ski threw water into my face as it dashed off. I finally steadied upright, my life jacket holding my chin to the surface. I saw the jet ski in the distance slowly circling back in my direction.

"You good, Dom?" Josh shouted, sitting on the back of the jet ski.

"I'm good!" I yelled back, coughing up water.

"Sorry!" Dave apologized. "I forgot that you were new to this."

"All good. At least it wasn't a broken arm," I tried the joke, hoping it would lighten the mood, but it didn't.

"If you say so. Wanna try getting the skis?" he added.

"Why not," the words slipped out of my mouth. Before I knew it, the skis were on my feet. I leaned back and nervously gave Josh a thumbs up. I felt myself slowly being pulled up, but my feet slipped and my face was once again in the water. I let go of the rope as water flew into my mouth. This process repeated three more times before I was finally taken to shore.

That night I laid in bed, staring at the ceiling. Josh was already passed out asleep below me.

The next day I walked out into the driveway to see my grandparents again. It was time to head home. I wished Josh and David goodbye as I stepped into the back seat.

"Did you have a good trip?" my grandma questioned. I reflected on the day before. I thought about how I'd fallen off of the jet ski and how I ate water when I tried water skiing. Then the thought finally came to me.

"It was amazing!" I blurted out. It had finally resonated with me that the trip wasn't about having fun or going perfect, it was about who I was with.

Weston Unrein

Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High
8th Grade, 3rd Place (tie)

Change

Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep! The sound of the small alarm sitting on the desk by the right side of my bed rang inside my head. After what felt like hours of waiting for the alarm to shut off, I turned my body to face the roof. I clenched my fist and hit the top of the alarm. It finally stopped wailing.

I turned to go back to bed when I heard, "Jacob!" My mom yells from the floor below. "Time for pancakes!" My face brightens up like I've been up for hours. I pull my blue dinosaur covers off of my legs and struggle to get out of my bed.

I quickly run through the hallway and dash for the stairs. I sprint down each one with excitement raging through me. The smell of chocolate chips and warm pancake batter lift me off of my feet. I finally reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Slow down, Bud!" my dad says while feeding a small piece of pancake to my little sister Sarah.

"I already fixed up a plate for you. Enjoy!" my mom shouts in response.

After breakfast, we play the best games in the whole world! The whole family plays Animal Party, Theater Bash, and my favorite of them all, Slam Karts! Dad is very good at that one, though, so I usually end up in second. Sometimes, I have to play with dolls with Sarah.

After we play games, lunch saves me from playing more with Sarah. Mom says we are going out to eat. She helps me pick out nice clothes to wear and tidies my black, smooth hair. When we get back, we usually rest. Sarah has her nap with Mom on the rocking chair, and Dad usually just sleeps on the couch. I stay up and play more games by myself. After we eat once more, we usually go to bed earlier than I'd like to because Mom said that we need enough energy to play as many games as we can! Everything is perfect just the way it is. I hope this lasts forever!

The next couple of days were amazing. I finally beat Dad in Slam Karts! I learned how to do this special move where I can blow past him easily! However, one day was different. We didn't play any games at all after breakfast. I was waiting on my spot on the couch. Sarah was waiting alone in her pink doll room. I sat and waited. I

tried my very best to be patient. I didn't even play the game by myself. I finally got up because it was now time to eat again. I peeked in the kitchen through the slightly-closed door. It was cracked just enough to the point where you could hear them speaking.

They were fighting! They weren't punching or wrestling like we would all do in the living room. They were arguing with their words. I think Mom saw me through the door. I quickly ran up the creaky stairs and into my room where I hopped into bed and hid under the covers hoping to wake up and realize it's all a dream.

"One, two, three, four," I repeated as I began counting. I was going to get to ten, and I would wake up to Mom and Dad calling me down to breakfast.

I got to ten. Has it really just been a terrible nightmare? I went downstairs. I didn't smell anything. I started crying. It was real. Mom and Dad were really fighting with each other. This continued throughout the week. Daily habits had vanished. We stopped going out. I noticed Mom and Dad fighting more. Whenever I noticed them arguing, I took Sarah somewhere else in the house to avoid her seeing them. She didn't need to know what was happening.

Every time I closed my eyes to sleep, I would see them fighting. I wanted this all to end. Why couldn't things go back to the way they were?

One day, something changed for good. We ate dinner together for the final time. After we ate, I was playing dolls with Sarah when I noticed Dad and Mom in the living room. I began walking down the stairs to see if everything was okay. Everything flashed before my eyes. Dad walked out the front door. He then turned the white van on. I sprinted to the living room, almost tripping on the carpet to see if Mom was ok. She had her head in her hands. I started to cry. I walked to the kitchen window. The van began driving off.

"Head to bed, baby. We'll talk in the morning," Mom said with a tear in her eye. I glanced back at the window one last time. The light of the van was no longer in the driveway.

I wiped my eyes and walked slowly upstairs. I didn't know what to feel. I didn't know what to think. I woke up in bed in the morning. My body wanted to get up, but I did not. I didn't want reality to be real anymore. I wanted to hide in the protection of my covers.

Mom walked in holding Sarah in her arms. "I have good news," she looked restless. "We are moving into a new house!" I didn't really care. I just wanted Dad to be back. "It has a hot tub, a basketball goal, a playground in the back, and a wonderful kitchen! You guys are going to love it."

"Will Dad be there?" I asked without expecting a good answer.

"No, he will stay here and you guys will see him every other week. Now, head to bed so we can start packing in the morning!" While trying to sleep, I overheard Sarah packing already. She always was trying to be tidy and ready for anything. I, however, didn't want to start packing.

The next month was full of packing and stress. We missed breakfast sometimes because Mom slept in. Eventually, we went to the house. I didn't mind the house, but it was a lot different. I didn't see Dad much this month; Mom said he was at Grandma's house.

After the next month passed, we officially are living inside the house. We switched houses every week. One parent looks after you for a certain amount of time. Then, you switch parents and they look over you for the other period of time. It wasn't at all like it was before. There was no more family game time. I always played by myself. However, it wasn't all bad. I still got to see them all the time. Both parents were still in my life just as much as before. It's not all terrible, though. Change is good. With change, you can learn to grow in new ways. You also get double everything. You get two Christmases and two birthdays! With two separate lives in two different houses, you get twice the amount of love.

Sarah never knew what happened to Mom and Dad or why they separated. I didn't either, but I had an idea. She didn't need to know. At her age, she needs to keep her purity. She just saw it as another present from Mom and Dad. That is the best thing you could think at her age. No child should have to go through this, but if you do like me, just know you can grow from it.

Oliver Stoecklein

Thomas More Prep-Marian Jr. High
8th Grade, Honorable Mention

Hydra Enemy of My Enemy

Epilogue

February 16, 2048: Washington, D.C. was empty, everywhere was quiet. But it turns out that Logan and his team had gathered everyone to show them the truth.

Logan showed everything on a big screen, showing what Hans and his friends really were. “You see, I thought Hans was the enemy, and then he saved me. I know I said he was the bad guy, but I was wrong to think that. I’m pretty sure we all were,” he said. When he looked at Lylla and Taylor and Zahra, they nodded their heads for him to continue.

“People can change, and we can change the way we see those people. So, open your eyes, and see,” Logan said. Hans and his men and his sister walked out to the people along with Armin. Suddenly, William walked up and shook his hand. He now saw his mistake, and everyone accepted them all.

Then a reporter asked about Logan’s expedition to find Captain Lane’s ship. “Caves, bats, and an aquifer with broken down bits of wood. There wasn’t much to find,” Logan replied. So, the reporters did not ask any more questions. Alex then told everyone that they had to say goodbye as Lane’s crew was about to leave.

At the ocean, Lane, Ben, Mia and their crew were loading all of their dragons onto their ship. Then Logan, Lylla, Taylor, and Rayzor came with their friends to say goodbye. “Are you sure you want to do this?” Logan asked.

“None of us want to live under command forever. We want to live free in this new century,” Lane replied. Logan thanked Lane as Land and Storm boarded the ship setting sail toward the horizon.

That was the last time they saw him. But finally, everyone can live in peace. There were many things that changed over the next days. Hans and his army were no longer known as bad people. They were seen as protectors now. Since Logan’s base was destroyed, he now got a new one where his home was, in the mountains in Colorado.

Lane had set off for adventure with his new crew who lived with dragons. His siblings were free in the new world. As for the Chein Gems, they were amazing artifacts, but in the wrong hands they were just too dangerous. Logan had no choice but to throw them in the ocean. Sometimes Logan would sit at the oceanside, but he didn’t want to do it alone. He came with Zahra and Rayzor to watch the sun set or rise. But...once in a great while, they get to see their friend, Lane, sailing beyond the horizon.

Morgan Corsair
Hays High School
9th Grade, 1st Place

When the Snow Stops

It was a snowy night when Hailey arrived at home. Her hot breath was visible in the air as she warmed her fingers. She pushed her key into the front door of her little apartment, cursing when it jammed. The door swung open, and she closed it behind her, still shivering from the cold.

“I’m home!” she announced, dropping her purse on a nearby table and kicking off her shoes, dodging empty beer bottles littered on the ground as she went.

She went further into the dark apartment towards the single light coming from the kitchen entrance. She stepped inside, noticing the familiar figure of her good friend, Stan, asleep at the counter, sitting on a barstool, surrounded by beer bottles.

She sighed and sat down in the barstool next to him. She recalled what it was like before. When she’d come home and Stan would have a fresh pot of dinner waiting for her on the table, and would give her a hug. He would smile a beam of sunshine, reflecting the light in every room in their once lit little home.

She remembered what his cooking tasted like. She wished she could taste it again.

“..Hailey?”

She flinched, looking down at Stan, who’s hazy eyes were now open, the bags under them more prominent than before.

Hailey smiled sweetly, “Hey.”

Stan didn’t respond, only stared at her for a long moment. Hailey’s smile didn’t falter, after all, she’d gotten used to this routine by now.

“You would not believe my day at work,” She started, “My manager said that I’m doing exceptionally, right? Apparently not exceptional enough to get a raise.”

Stan’s chest rose and fell.

“I mean,” She continued, “A two dollar raise after all I’ve done is too much to ask? Gosh...”

Stan's eyes flickered. "What are you doing here?"

Hailey's smile fell, "I wanted to see you..."

"Again?"

They were quiet for a long moment.

"I'm tired, Hailey." Stan sat up, knocking an empty bottle over. "I need some consistency, something to have and hold and know it will never change or disappear."

"Everything changes," Hailey shrugged, "Eventually."

"I'm so tired of everything changing," Stan's whisper slowly turned into a yell, "I'm tired of changing! Nothing ever changed until you-"

"So you blame me?" Hailey's face darkened.

"Yes!" Stan yelled half-heartedly, after all, he didn't really.

"You left me with everything!" He continued, "You left me with all of that baggage! And what's worse is that I could never let it go because someone had to keep it together for the both of us."

"I never asked you to!" Hailey yelled back, "You could have thrown it all away at any time!"

Stan's face turned red, "You killed yourself when things were just going back to normal!"

Everything went quiet.

"Why..." Stan finally said, choking on a sob, "Why is it that when you decided to up and leave you never actually left?"

Hailey didn't reply, only stared at him with empty eyes.

"All I wanted was to live with you, for you, now all I am is stuck living without you," He clenched his fists, "It's not fair!"

Hailey looked up at him with pitiful eyes, and he stopped. His breath slowed as he calmed down.

He spoke barely above a whisper, "I felt like if I stopped... This," He gestured to the mess of a kitchen, "you'd really be dead."

He turned to Hailey again, "Drinking, crying, praying... just to see you how I want you to be.. In a way it's like you never died."

Why are you so angry?" Hailey finally spoke.

"Not at you, you're perfect. That's the problem. You're not..." Stan wiped his eyes, "...Her." Hailey tilted her head in confusion.

Stan sighed, "It feels like I'm just looking for any reason to hate you, because maybe if I hate you, I can forget you."

"Why do you want to forget?"

"Because your memory is the only thing keeping me alive." His voice shook, "And I don't want to live."

There was a beat of silence as Hailey opened her mouth, then closed it again. Then opened it once more, "Why am I so quiet?"

Stan shrugged, "Because I don't know what you'd say."

It was quiet once more.

A smile came to Hailey's lips, "You're doing so well, Stan."

Then she scooted closer, grasping Stan's hands in her own.

"You have grown and matured so much, and I am so proud of you."

Her sweet smile was a sparkle in Stan's eyes. He watched for any hint of sarcasm or false truth, and finally, he laughed. He clutched her hand harder and harder.

"Yeah right..."

Until her hand...

"...She'd never say that."

...Disappeared.

His chest rose and fell, staring at his hands where he felt no warmth. She left nothing behind. Slowly, he rose to his feet, hand on his chest, making sure his heart was still beating.

Several seconds he spent standing in the middle of the kitchen, breathing, feeling... slowly, he dragged oxygen into his lungs and let it go. Slowly.

Slowly.

Then he finally moved.

He lit the stove, placed a pot on the surface, and started to cook. He could hear the front door open and close, "Crap!" He heard his roommate, Ryan, curse as he probably tripped over a beer bottle.

"Dude," Ryan said, stumbling into the kitchen, "Can you clean up your junk-"

Ryan froze when he saw Stan at the stove, grinning like a little kid as he dipped a spoon into the sauce and held it up to Ryan's face, "Wanna taste?"

Ryan didn't respond, only stared at him for a long moment.

Stan's smile didn't falter, "It's Prego~."

Ryan ignored the spoon and pulled Stan into a tight embrace. Stan's smile faded as he dropped the spoon.

"It's good to have you back, brother."

Stan's eyes glazed over with tears and he slowly hugged back. He hadn't noticed yet, but the snow had stopped.

Lily Stivers

Hays High School

10th Grade, 1st Place

Where the Music Waits

The sun was beginning to set in the distance of the warm spring night. It had just rained, so as my horse's hooves clomped on the dirt road, mud clung to his legs. My heart was icy, and I felt dread sink further in my gut with each step we took. I knew with certainty that my mother was out here, lost and probably afraid. Just yesterday, she had been home with my younger sister and me. Then, like a fleeting breath, she never returned from getting supper.

As the last man in the house after my father's death, I knew I had to go out and find her. She couldn't have traveled far. It had been less than a secondary sundown since I last saw her. I could still hear her echoey laugh. I refused to let her go down the same fate as my father; let her also disappear into the night, never to be seen again.

As the sun slowly hid behind the trees, I made out a town in the distance. I perked up almost instantly, hopeful that my mother had taken shelter there. With a lash on my horse's back, we sped towards the town. With every step, my weakened body bounced violently on my horse. Dehydration clung to my cheeks and rocked my head like I was in the ocean.

As I approached, music and laughter filled my ears. I cocked an eyebrow, intrigued despite my fatigue. I practically fell off my horse to tie him to a fence post, my legs and hands wobbling from the action. As I brushed my hands off while stepping away, I stepped in a puddle with a soft groan. Withdrawing my foot from the puddle, I grumbled curses as I watched the falling sun reflected in the water.

Before I could fight back a frustrated grumble and potential kick to the post, a hand tapped my shoulder. I let out a surprised noise and turned to see a girl with long blonde hair and giant blue eyes looking up at me. She looked ready to speak, but I had more important matters to cover.

"Have you seen my mother? Shorter, big nose, old?" I pressed, my stress lines certainly more pronounced as I spoke.

The girl paused, seemingly rewiring her brain after my sudden question, before responding with her bushy brows furrowed, "No, I'm sorry."

My entire body collapsed inward at her words, distress filling my gut and threatening to spill out of my eyes. It wasn't just the worry of my missing mom; it was my exhaustion, my dehydration. Without another word, I turned to get back on my horse. I couldn't stay here, not with my Mother still lost. Just as I was mounting my horse to try at the next town, that perfect, sweet, southern voice spoke again.

"Wait-" she called.

I turned around before I could stop myself, instantly feeling my heart flip in my chest. The will to do whatever she wanted took over. As I stood staring at her, I realized I had completely missed what she just said.

"What?" I questioned sheepishly.

"You should stay. There's a party, and I'm sure someone must've seen your Mama." She repeated, her smile alone enough to convince me.

“Y-You’ve got a point.” I stammered, my face red hot.

Before I could figure out another word to say, something smarter, she was grabbing my hand with her smaller one. I must have been sweating profusely, as her hand was ice-cold against my palm.

As she tugged me along, I tried to ask people if they’d seen my mom. Each step we took, I asked another smiling person if they’d seen her, to no avail. I had never seen so many happy folk in one place. It was equal parts unnerving and a relief. It felt like a break, like their lack of stress could rub off on me.

As time went on, the carefree environment calmed me down. My head tipped back with jugs of booze, my brain rattled with the noise of instruments, and my feet tapped to the beat. I had nearly forgotten about the key reason I agreed to stay. Regretfully, I enjoyed this. It was an absence of pain, a decision of fruitful ignorance.

“You should stay!” My mystery girl yelled over the music, echoing my exact thoughts.

“I’d have to know your name first!” I yelled back, feeling the breeze hit my flashing teeth.

“Eleanor!” She responded.

My heart grew at the knowledge. Without another word, I grabbed her hand and twirled her around. Her giggle faded into the overpowering music, but her grin was more than enough.

The night slipped away from me faster than I could realize it, drink after drink, until I suddenly woke up the next day. My head pounded from the booze, and the beating sun didn’t help. I woke in a startle, leaning against a tree with my head in my hands. I finally looked around as I rubbed my eyes, having to pause as I couldn’t believe what was facing me.

The entire town was gone, leaving a massive graveyard in its wake. The trees had rotted from the inside out, and the smell of wilted flowers filled my nostrils. The once luscious grass crunched beneath my feet. The eerie feeling was exemplified by the tall shadows of the bare trees. Every place I had physically experienced last night had vanished. I gripped onto the tree as I stood with a wobble in my step, practically running to where I had tied up my horse. I gasped in horror as I found him lying dead, a vulture eating away the rotting flesh of his neck. I let out an ear-piercing scream, clutching the sides of my head in horror as what I had hoped to be my life crumbled. Everything was gone, my one chance of escape, dissipated as quickly as a gust of air. Now there was also no chance of finding my mom. It had now been three sundowns since she was last seen.

I stumbled into the sea of tombstones ahead, reading name after name. I halted when I saw a familiar name. On the first few graves in the front row, “Eleanor” was inscribed on a tombstone. I staggered back, my heart pounding and fear sinking in. I stepped to the next grave, the name of the bartender. The next one, the man who had provided me with water, I had so desperately needed.

This wasn’t my imagination - these were real people. I ran to the crumbling tombstones ahead, desperate to find answers. Name after name was unrecognizable to me, until one made me pause. “Mary Tonia” was carved into the heartless stone, my Mother’s name. My entire body froze to the same hardness of the grave in front of me, everything crumbling before me. What was going on? She had just gone missing; how could she already be buried? I tripped over my feet in my haste to leave, falling right into a pile of dirt with an exhale of pain.

I screamed again as roots emerged from the Earth and began to wrap around me, tugging me into the ground against my will. I thrashed violently and screamed for help, feeling the dirt fill my lungs. I screamed until everything went black, and I felt the pressure of nature on me. Distantly, I heard the welcomed noise of a band.

Elisabeth Bergman

Hays High School

10th Grade, 2nd Place

Frosted Mirror

Joey had always thought families were meant to be warm. But with her cousins Fin and Tilly visiting, the warmth was gone. Fin was a grade above Joey but still the same age seventeen while Tilly was only eleven. Fin had a loud, sharp voice that always seemed to be on the hunt for something to make fun of. Tilly, on the other hand, was

quiet. Joey always made an effort to be outgoing and cheerful around her. She was described as so kind she wouldn't hurt a fly, always wanting to make people happy. She chose kindness even when her chest felt tight.

"Still reading your weird book?" Fin asked with a slight grin.

"They're not weird. They're interesting," Joey mumbled.

Fin laughed and shook his head as if joy was something impossible to understand.

Suddenly, Mary's voice broke the uncomfortable silence. "Enough. We are not starting another argument." Her tone was firm. Mary believed there was only one correct way to think and one correct way to behave. She had raised Joey under that belief, even when her husband—Joey's dad, Bub—went with the flow.

Bub sat relaxed on the couch, a faint smile on his face. In a monotone voice, he said, "Mary, they'll figure it out."

Joey had always been jealous of her father's ability to stay calm.

Mary interrupted Joey's thoughts. "Enough. We're going to the cabin to reset our family dynamic and have a little fun together."

The cabin was old, dark, and eerie, immediately giving Joey an uneasy feeling. A small living room branched off into a kitchen and two tiny bedrooms, each with two beds. That meant Joey would be sleeping on the couch. She wasn't fond of the idea but didn't protest, wanting to keep the peace.

The cabin sat deep in the woods. No service. No neighbors. No way to contact the outside world.

Joey opened a window. The air was sharp, crisp, and cold, nearly stealing the breath from her lungs. She stumbled backward, hitting a mirror and knocking it to the floor. It shattered. She bent down to pick it up, slicing her hand in the process. Blood welled up, but she barely noticed.

She stared into the broken glass. Her reflection looked distant almost ghostlike as if she were standing alone in the middle of a snowstorm.

"Move, dude," Fin said, shoving her out of the way.

She snapped out of her daze.

"Look at all the snow coming in!" Tilly said excitedly.

Mary turned to Bub, disbelief written across her face. "Snow wasn't on the forecast. Maybe we should go home and come back another time."

Bub dropped onto the couch. "Nope. I think we all need to chill. It's just a bit of snow. Right, Joey?"

Joey didn't respond. All she could hear was the howling wind and what sounded like screaming outside.

"Dude, stop being weird," Fin said, sitting beside Bub.

Joey rubbed her hand. "The snow's really coming down. Looks like we're snowed in for a while."

Mary sighed. "Let's head to bed. Everybody."

That night, Joey lay awake, her head spinning and her stomach in knots. Sweat gathered on her forehead.

I need to snap out of it, she thought. It's just nerves.

But sleep wouldn't come. The snow outside sounded louder now angrier.

Joey got up to use the restroom. In the hallway, she froze. The mirror stood there, frost creeping along its edges. She shivered.

A dark figure appeared beside her in the reflection.

She gasped and fell backward, rubbing her eyes, begging it to disappear.

When she looked again, it was still there.

She screamed.

The figure looked like her dad but wrong. His skin was blue and lifeless, frost clinging to his eyelashes and lips. Joey staggered back, bumping into Fin and the rest of her family.

Fin shoved her aggressively. "Get a grip. What is wrong with you? If I wasn't your cousin, I'd be embarrassed to be around you. You're a freak."

"That's enough!" Mary screamed, pulling them apart. "You two need to start becoming friends."

"I don't want that," Fin snapped. "I don't want anything."

Hot tears rolled down Joey's face. "Goodnight," she said quietly, her voice barely sounding like her own.

Before bed, she glanced at the mirror once more. Her father's frozen body stared back.

She closed her eyes, thinking of frost spreading endlessly.

Joey woke to screaming.

Her mother stood on the porch, staring at Bub's lifeless body in the snow. Frost coated his lips and lashes the same way it had in the mirror.

Mary collapsed beside him, sobbing. "He must've slipped on the ice," she cried. "As soon as we get power, we're leaving. We're calling the police."

The cabin fell silent.

Hours passed. Joey lay staring at nothing, her skin clammy. When her mother walked past, irritation surged through her.

As night fell, Fin grew crueler. “Guess your dad wasn’t as tough as he thought,” he laughed.

Something inside Joey hardened like ice.

That night, she stood before the mirror again. Frost had consumed nearly all of it.

She didn’t scream when she saw her father.

She didn’t scream when she saw Fin his head split open, an icicle lodged through his skull holding Tilly’s stiff, blue body.

She didn’t scream when she saw her mother, colorless, fingers blackened with frostbite.

Instead, she shouted in rage. “Why won’t the snow stop? Why won’t the frost go away?”

She punched the mirror.

It shattered.

The figures reached her. She felt her mother’s cold hand brush her face—then vanish.

Joey ran through the cabin. Everyone was gone.

She screamed, clawing at her hair as the howling snow mixed with whispered voices in her head. She fled into the blizzard and collapsed, lying there until morning.

A police car pulled up.

The officer gently lifted her into a chair. “What happened?” he asked softly.

All Joey could say was, “The snow killed them.”

The officer frowned, looking around at the bare ground. He placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Kid,” he said quietly, “what snow?”

Bekah Clark

Hays High School

10th Grade, 3rd Place

The Burden of Everlasting

I, alone, bear the curse of The Crono. I, alone, am fated to watch every friendly smile turn into a tombstone in a sea of graves. I have seen the rise and fall of great civilizations, from the Roman empire to United States of America. Everything eventually falls to the passage of time; the hand of The Crono.

The Crono has no decipherable form. In one instance it can appear almost human-like, and in the next it can take on a Lovecraftian form of sorts. Its movement produces a sound like falling sand. To watch it move is like watching a dance, it is graceful and almost ethereal. The Crono is unmerciful in nature, it lacks any sort of moral. There is no discrimination between its victims.

I could no longer bear witnessing the wrath of The Crono, so I hid away. I traveled to a small, uncharted island. The island was perfect as there was not a single human inhabitant and due to its small size, I had thought it would be a long time before anyone could find it.

I began to build a shelter on the island from materials that could be found everywhere around me. I had been honing my carpentry skills for a millennium allowing me to make quick work of construction. After around eighty-two years I had finished my estate. It was a grand building with tall white pillars out in front. There were large windows that covered the estate. The full area of the building was around that of a university building.

I had imagined that it would be a time before the island was discovered as how seldom it was for one to just stumble upon a place such as this. How wrong I was. It was not but nine months after the completion of my estate in the month of October that a fishing boat would come upon the shores of the island.

The vessel held only three individuals, an elderly lady, a man around his forties, and a young girl of which I assumed to be his daughter. I knew it would be long before they fell upon my estate, so I had to act fast.

“Perhaps a fire on the island would keep them away,” I thought out loud as I watched the three from a distance, “but that would put my housing at...” My thoughts ceased as the chime of a clock rung out from behind. The Crono moved past me as swiftly as falling sand, weaving through trees and bushes toward where the three stood. The Crono leaped out from the trees into the old lady. The leaves around her fell obscuring her face and I knew that her fate was sealed.

Not but one week later the elderly woman, who I would soon learn was named Ms. Darly, passed. In that time the three would come upon my estate. Feeling pitiful for them, I allowed them to stay there with me as they waited for help. The three had many questions for me, mostly pertaining to what I was doing here on the island, which I danced around. The young girl, whose name was Sally, was particularly curious. She was twelve at the time and so full of life it made it hard to accept what would befall her.

The two remaining visitors grew sorrowful and distant after the passing of Ms. Darly. The Father to Sally, Mr. Windholt, tried to mask how he felt but when you have lived as long as I have lived you tend to see straight through attempts such as these.

Luckily enough for Mr. Windholt he would be spared the wrath of The Crono. He fell ill and with each passing day he grew weaker. His time left in this world was not long. In a fit of pettiness, the Crono would decide its next victim.

Mr. Windholt would go on to pass two days later. I had seen men greater than Mr. Windholt pass, but for some unexplainable reason, his passing filled me with a particular kind of sorrow. It was the kind of sorrow that sat at the bottom of your gut, laying deeply rooted unwilling to fully express itself. Of course, Sally felt tenfold what I had.

“Why do things like these happen William?” Sally asked me one dreary, dull day whilst looking out one of the windows.

“I have not the slightest clue Sally.” I lied, I knew that the reason things like this happen is that someone or something out there amongst the stars simply enjoyed watching us squirm. This thought, for whatever reason, angered me immensely.

As Sally continued living with me, I saw the Crono go into effect. From the time The Crono first attacked to now, the middle of October, she had aged ten years and she only seemed to age faster.

Now, on October 30, Sally looked to be ninety years of age. It was apparent that this would be her last day. This thought made me increasingly sad. I spent every minute of the day with her, cooking her favorite meals, playing her favorites songs, and ensuring her a favorable last day.

It was now eleven fifty-nine PM. Sally sits asleep in a chair taking short, shallow breaths. Unfortunately, the final minute passed. The chime of a clock rang out. Sally faded away and only the formless face of The Crono was left.

“Are you happy? You have won, now leave.”

The Crono simply rose and moved towards me.

“What? Have you finally decided to take me?” I quietly chuckled, “no, of course you haven’t. You would never give me that gift, so don’t tempt me.”

The Crono continued to move, edging ever closer.

“Well? If you plan to try and torment me just leave.”

The Crono shifted its form. It appeared first as Ms. Darly, then as Mr. Windholt, and finally as Sally. Anger filled me. What I said next came from so deep in my soul that it made anything ever said before sound like a lie.

“I hate you. Your very existence is a plague; a plague more wicked than anything that could be.” My voice cracked and tears welled up and eventually overflowed, beginning to run down my cheek.

“Leave me, your presence sickens me. Abi a Me! Aléjate de mí! Begone from me! I’ll say it however I must... Begone!”

As my final word rang out, the chime of a clock could be heard. The Crono blinked out of sight. I would go to try and sit down but as I stepped my knees buckled and I fell to the floor. I caught myself on my hands, but they weren’t mine. These hands were wrinkled and veiny. I looked towards a window and saw in the reflection myself only, my hair was white and my cheeks hung low. Wrinkles covered my once youthful face. Was I an immortal, aging? This made no sense. Had The Crono come to the decision that I was no longer worthy of immortality.

I lay there unsure and confused, but as the shock subsided, I felt a sense of joy. Death had finally chosen me. My vision began to blur but I felt no fear, I welcomed the release with open arms. As my soul escaped from my body, I knew that nothing could be as great as the rest in whatever afterlife awaited me.

Chase Baldwin

Hays High School

10th Grade, Honorable Mention

The Last Red Button

Most retired supervillains receive a cozy house in the suburbs. According to a glossy flyer from the Villain Retirement Program, the initiative “reintegrates formerly hostile individuals to understand and sympathize with others.” However, I remained skeptical. Once someone declares war on a civilization, reconciliation with the people they tried to destroy feels impossible.

His name, at least the one he insisted on using, was Timortus.

When I knocked on his pastel-blue front door, he opened it with theatrical slowness. A black cape hung from his shoulders. However, his red sweatpants ruined the intimidation factor. In his off hand, he carried a mug labeled *Fuel of Fear*. The steam from the cup curled upward, dramatic and completely unnecessary.

“Auxilio,” he intoned, voice echoing against the entryway walls. It seemed he waited down the hallway, his voice growing ever louder and his footsteps coming ever closer. “You arrive to witness the final stages of my dominion.”

When he reached the entrance, a stretched floral couch sat against the wall beside framed landscape paintings and a blanket folded with careful precision. Sunlight streamed through his curtains. Outside, trimmed hedges lined a modest walkway.

“Dominion over... hydrangeas?” I asked, glancing toward the garden.

He narrowed his eyes but offered no correction.

According to his file, Timortus once engineered doomsday devices capable of destabilizing major cities. News sites described countdown clocks, metal towers, and one dramatic laser array that failed to power on. Authorities always stopped him before catastrophe struck, though the spectacle gave him the nickname of “Defeated Dan” due to the fact he never could succeed. Now, he must attend mandatory therapy and receive a monthly pension.

Despite the suburban surroundings, sparks flickered beneath the basement door.

At first, I dismissed the faint humming as harmless tinkering. However, heavy deliveries soon arrived at odd hours. Metal coils. Reinforced wiring. Crates stamped with strange warnings. Timortus whispered with a grin, “Each crate arrived in pieces, subtly enough that no one questioned a thing. Consider it... rehearsal for old times.” Each package disappeared into the unknown basement, where the humming deepened into something deliberate.

Meanwhile, Timortus maintained his flair for theatrics. While pouring cereal, he whispered, “Precision governs all empires.” During neighborhood walks with me, he referred to homeowners’ association as “the council of lesser powers.” He even labeled leftover meatloaf... “Experimental Fuel – Do Not Tamper.” Though it is mildly ridiculous, he carried himself with absolute sincerity.

Three nights later, the humming grew more aggravating to the point of disturbance. Unable to ignore the noise, I descended the basement stairs without giving myself away. Heat pressed against my face. Light pulsed in measured intervals along the far wall.

Then I saw it... a machine that towered and gave the basement an immense feeling of dread.

Metal ribs arched around the central main frame. Thick cables coiled like restrained serpents. Panels blinked with a calculated rhythm. At the center lay the universal symbol of disaster in pop culture, an enormous red button with the words “FINALE” engraved into it.

Timortus stood beside it, his cape carefully draped across his shoulder. His hands hovered inches above the button, fingers ready but tense.

“You enter uninvited,” he said, though his voice lacked its usual thunder.

I folded my arms. “If that device vaporizes the country, paperwork becomes difficult.”

For a moment, the silence replaced the humming. Then, he exhaled.

“I have pressed many buttons,” he began quietly. “Each promised transformation. Collapse. Ascension.” His gaze lingered on the pedestal. “Each demanded a final spectacle.”

“And this one?” I asked.

“This spectacle concludes the finale that I have planned.”

Confusion displaced my own suspicion. Instead of a missile system or a power conduit, the machine’s wiring directed towards an energy core of sorts.

“I stored the remainder of my capacity,” he continued. “Residual power... dangerous if left unattended.” He looked me straight in the eyes. “A villain does not simply... retire. There must exist a final act, like a bow on a present.”

My face fell as the realization set in.

“You built a finale,” I said.

He nodded once. Without the booming cadence, he seemed smaller somehow, less of a conqueror, more of a craftsman unsure of his next project.

“If I abandon Timortus,” he said carefully, “I prefer to do so by choice. Not through decay. Not through my own boredom.”

Suddenly, one of the lawn sprinklers clicked to life outside, spraying arcs of water across the garden.

“What happens when you press it?” I asked.

“The stored energy will discharge safely,” he replied. “Only light, some sounds, and a harmless spectacle.” A faint pause followed. “Afterward, nothing remains, only me and you... in the basement.”

No domination. No countdown threatening continents. Only closure for the two of us to see.

He stared at the button; hesitation flickered across his face. For the first time since our introduction, fear crossed his expression, not of authorities or a superhero arriving to stop him, but the fear of... being normal, becoming ordinary.

“Auxilio,” he said, voice steady yet restrained, “observe.”

Instead of stepping back, I remained beside him. “Press it,” I said.

He lowered his hand as I watched.

The button depressed with a satisfying mechanical click.

Suddenly, light flooded the basement. Energy surged upward through the cables and shot through concealed conduits toward the backyard. The basement walls came down slightly to reveal a fire show of sparks from the outside erupting above the hydrangeas. Fireworks crackled in controlled bursts. Garden lights illuminated in synchronized patterns and the sprinklers continued to intensify. Rainbows began to form amidst the drifting smoke.

The display lasted exactly thirty seconds.

Then, the silence reclaimed the room.

The machine powered down. Indicator lights faded and everything came to a sudden halt.

No tremors shook the earth. No alarms blared. Only the distant hum of suburban life continued: a dog barking, a car passing, and neighbors chatted outside while the world quietly carried on.

“Well,” I said, glancing toward the window, “the hydrangeas survived.”

He slowly removed the cape and folded it over a workbench. Without the fabric he once wore, he looked less like a headline and more like a friendly neighbor.

“Martin,” he said after a pause. “You may call me Martin, your new next-door friend.”

Outside, the last spark dissolved into evening air.

For the first time, the world did not brace for the worst when a red button activated. Instead, one man used it to release the grip on his previous and villainous past. To reenter society and accomplish the impossible, something no supervillain could ever dream of.

I then open my notebook again, the one object telling me his misdeeds. I look back at the section with how “bad” of a person he used to be. I wrote one word beneath the comment section: **Misunderstood**.

I closed my notebook for good and never wrote him up for a violation.

Brayden Staley-Herman

Hays High School

11th Grade, 1st Place

In His Image

One. Two. Three. Four.

My feet echo as I walk.

One. Two. Three. Four.

This time, almost no sound.

One. Two. Three. Four.

One echoing. One silent.

I sit in the center of the Room. If I lay spread-eagle, I could touch all four walls. I don't. I sit where I touch nothing, pretending space is freedom.

I have been locked here a long time. I count to stay sane.

According to the Omni, I should not be able to count at all.

The Omni is both church and government, Scripture enforced by law. They teach that women are no longer born. We are designed. Selected in prayer rooms and laboratories, traits typed into sacred systems. Sixty-two days after a man makes his selections, he receives his Genesis.

A companion.

A servant.

A pet.

The Genesis Project is their proof that women are not human, only creations meant to serve. Some of us are given names. Most are not. It is easier, they say, to control something nameless.

I have a name.

The man who gave it to me is gone.

He was young, though grey threaded his temples. His eyes were blue — I think. I try not to remember too clearly. He made me only a few years ago, but I have spent most of those years alone.

He was kind.

He taught me letters. Numbers. How to read. How to write my thoughts instead of swallow them. He told me the Omni was wrong — that souls were not assigned by gender.

They saw him give me a book.

They took him away.

They brought me here and asked how much I had learned. Whether he had shown me others.

Whether I understood.

I did not speak.

They hit me. Dragged me. Withheld food.

I did not speak.

Silence is the only thing they cannot program out of me.

A scraping sound breaks the quiet. The bulb overhead flickers.

A metal plate slides through the slot.

I hurry forward. A plain roll. A bowl of murky soup. The meat is meant to resemble cow or pig, though I doubt it is either.

I eat slowly, stretching each swallow. I drink the water last.

When I slide the dishes back, the hands do not retreat.

The lock clicks.

The door opens.

A tall man with a thick beard stands there, my bowl and cup in one hand. His other rests near the gun at his hip. "Get up," he says. "Follow me."

The hallway is bright enough to sting my eyes. We pass doors I have never seen opened. At the end, he unlocks another and pushes it wide.

I stop.

A bathroom.

An ivory tub with gold claws. Steam rising from clean water. Bottles of soap in careful rows — lavender, rose, mint.
A hand shoves me inside.
“Get clean. When you’re done, go through the other door.”
The lock turns.
I strip and sink into the water. It burns at first, but I stay under until it cools. I scrub until the water clouds brown. Lavender fills the air.
My owner used to say he designed me to be tidy. I used to resent that.
Now I cling to it.
A pounding on the door.
“Hurry.”
I wrap myself in a thick towel, letting myself feel its softness for one stolen second before stepping through the next door.
A bedroom waits. White and lilac bedding. Polished wood. A full-length mirror.
The man hands me a satin dress — deep purple.
“Put it on.”
He leaves.
The fabric slides over my skin like water. In the mirror, a girl stares back at me.
Petite. Pale. Collarbone sharp against skin. Blue eyes too bright for a colorless face. Black hair against white.
Black and white. Alive,
but reduced.
I turn away.
Sunlight spills through tall windows as we walk. I lift my face toward it. I had almost forgotten warmth that does not hurt.
At the end of the corridor stand massive double doors with golden handles.
Someone has claimed me.
“Stray,” they call women like me - Genesis returned for correction. There are few strays now.
The Omni built more facilities to prevent them.
I was kept because of who made me.
And because I learned.
The bearded man grips my chin.
“He’s waiting. Obey, and you stay here. Refuse, and you go back. And then I’ll get you.”
He shoves me toward the doors.
Inside waits a vast room and a single desk. Behind it stands the High Chancellor of the Omni.
His sermons are law. His faith governs nations.
“Hello,” he says gently. “I’ve heard you are... unusual.”
He steps closer.
“What is your name?” Silence.
“I spoke to the man who created you. He named you.”
Silence.
“Just one word.” Silence.
He studies my face, then sighs. “Nothing in your eyes but vacancy. Beautiful, yes - but shaped by another. No true value.”
He turns, then suddenly straightens and grabs my arm.
“If you will not answer, you will see why you should.”
He drags me through corridors and throws open a heavy door.
The room beyond is enormous.
The floor is covered in bodies.

Dozens of women lie against cold stone - skeletal, unmoving. Some are clearly dead. Others crawl weakly toward the doorway, eyes vacant of all emotion.

“These are the ones who refused.”

One woman reaches for me.

I bend forward and retch. The roll and soup spill onto her outstretched hand.

She looks up at me. Her lips move. No sound comes.

She stops moving.

“She does not understand what you’ve done,” the Chancellor says. “This is why the Genesis Project exists. Because women are not human.”

He steps closer.

“Your name. Or you join them.”

If I refuse, I return to the facility.

If I speak, I become his experiment.

One. Two. Three. Four.

One echoing. One silent.

One breath.

One word.

“My name,” I say, my voice rough from disuse, “is Ophelia.”

The Chancellor smiles.

And I follow him out.

One. Two. Three. Four.

This time, my footsteps make no sound at all.

Elisabeth Hyatt
Hays High School
11th Grade, 2nd Place

Dinner

It was hunger's fleeting presence that I felt when I came home to find that my parents had been replaced by vampires. There was little evidence for this, of course, I could only find that consensus in the pasty white skin that veiled over them like clothing. I only knew something was off, when I found myself staring at the white, linen tablecloth, usually devoid of stains or imperfections, a perfect puritanical fantasy. It was stained pink; splotchy, faded red soaked into white. My eyes could only stare into it as I avoided the food that sat on the white, china plate.

The food, or whatever it was, stained the plate with crimson. Far darker than the stain on the tablecloth, this red made its presence known from the very moment my eyes crept onto it. The food was something unfamiliar, it felt unnatural to try and call it that. But my “mother” could only assure me that it was dinner.

It was a slab of reddened meat with purple, bulging veins. Crimson liquid leaked out of it like water on a sponge. It seemed to hold an immeasurable amount of liquid. When I stared at it, my body betrayed me, my stomach growled in sudden convulsions, almost like it hated itself for its hunger.

My “mother” stood over me. She looked like my mother in every way that didn’t count, and it was a horrifying sight to find such contradictions in her face devoid of imperfection.

“Aren’t you going to eat your dinner, Eleanor?” She whispered, her voice a tune too perfect it boiled over into the uncanny. I nodded, staring back at the plate.

My stomach erupted into growls and I felt guilty for the hunger that seeped into me. How could I feel the sin of hunger?

I found no answer in the perfection of the china plate, stained a few times over. I picked my fork up, the silver felt cold in my shaking hand. My stomach growled, betraying itself. I felt empty and hollow inside. I wanted to feel comfort in this, but I knew that everything in me desired the ability to feel full.

I cut into the meat and impaled it with the silver fork. My breath came out in short gasps, my hand turned into a shaking metronome. I wanted nothing more than this. I was hungry. I needed to devour it all.

Once my teeth tore into the thick, juicy substance I felt my tastebuds cry in ecstasy. The taste was indescribable, unthinkable. I devoured the rest without thought, abandoning my fork and with it reason, tearing into the meat with my hands, dipping my fingers in the juice so I could savor every taste.

It was only in this guilty fulfillment that I could consume, satiate every desire, every hunger. When I was done, red had soiled the white tablecloth. My face and hands were smeared with red as if it were evidence for a crime. The table looked like a murder, and I was guilty.

I stared up at my “parents,” they smiled in approval, no emotion in their eyes. I found little comfort in their gaze, guilt flooded in like a tidal wave. I felt sick to my stomach. Reality sunk in like teeth.

My stomach twisted into knots, and I ran for the bathroom. I bent over the toilet like a mourner in prayer, and a flood of blood-like crimson poured out of me, spilling into the toilet. My hands clutched the porcelain bowl, leaving red fingerprints.

The red poured out of me until there was nothing left, and I felt as hollow as I did before, my stomach an empty vat of nothingness. I clutched the sides of the toilet bowl like it would save me, squeezing until my fingertips turned white.

Tears welled up, I wondered what I had done, and how I could undo this. I found none of my questions answered as I flushed all the red down the drain.

My bones contorted themselves under my skin as if they didn’t know how to sit right. I felt like a ghost as I stood up. My body was a foreign object merely holding me up. My vision was going hazy, and I wondered if any of this was real.

I laughed quietly without knowing why. Something was seriously wrong inside me. I had some kind of hunger boiling inside me, and no matter what I did, no matter how much the regret would always seep in and I would try and throw all the ugliness up, I would always be ugly inside.

This feeling inside only persisted as I pushed myself in front of the bathroom mirror, staring at my reflection under the haze of the unforgiving light. The bluntness did well to conceal none of my features, and the usual disdain that sat within my reflection stood nothing compared to what I felt as I stared back at myself.

There was nothing more horrifying, more grotesque than staring in the mirror at yourself, knowing you had caused some kind of change that could never be set right. It was apparent what my unyielding hunger had caused, and I could only revel in my own grotesqueness. I was a unique kind of monster, it was almost as if I had designed myself to be the epitome of everything I hated.

I held out my shaking hand, watching as the reflection moved in tandem, and I was certain this was real. My skin had abandoned its once tanned color, and was replaced with a pasty white. Bulging, purple veins ran around my skin, and thick bruises reminiscent of livor mortis coated my skin in splotches.

My face was the worst of it all, thick blood ran down my mouth in globs, those same purple veins bulged out in gross exaggeration. My neck and parts of my face bloated out like a corpse, making me look puffy and dead. I found myself utterly unrecognizable.

There was nothing I could do but gawk at the horror of my transformation. It was clear what my insatiable hunger had done to me. A scream escaped my breath, and I fell to my knees in grief of what I once was.

A few excruciating minutes passed, and my “mother” found me on the bathroom floor. Her uncanny shape blurred under the stream of tears veiling my eyes, making my new reality only feel unreal.

“Eleanor. You’re fine. See?” She held a handheld mirror in front of my face, I stared back at it. Confusion flooded me as I took in my reflection. I looked... normal. The pasty skin and purple veins had left as soon as it came. The girl that stared back at me looked completely ordinary.

I looked toward my “mother” in confusion. She said nothing, however, and she only grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet. Unreality slipped into my mind as she pulled me out of the bathroom, and I barely saw my surroundings as my mind raced with fear.

She pushed me down on a chair, and my eyes focused again. I was back where I had started. The white, linen tablecloth stared at me in boredom. There was a single stain, a splotch of pink.

My mother’s favorite china plate sat in front of me. A tear ran down my cheek as I looked up at my “mother,” still hovering over me.

“Aren’t you going to eat your dinner, Eleanor?”

Macie Herman

Hays High School

11th Grade, 3rd Place (tie)

Soul Ties

“Lena?” he said, his voice unsure. Lena didn’t see the strings the day she found out Talon cheated. She felt them first, a strange hollow tear somewhere inside her chest that never quite closed the right way. It was like something under her ribs had shifted and tied itself to someone who didn’t want it anymore. A few days later the strings appeared, thin silver threads stretching from the center of her chest and slipping quietly out her bedroom window. They faded into the distance, almost invisible against the sky. She didn’t have to follow them to know where they led, Talon. Of course.

He had been her first real love, the first boy she stayed up until two in the morning talking to about nothing and everything. The first person she trusted with the softer parts of herself, the thoughts and secrets she never said out loud to anyone else. All of that had once felt safe with him. And somehow he let it go like it meant nothing.

She told everyone she was fine. She laughed when her friends mentioned his name and rolled her eyes like the whole thing was stupid. Like she didn’t care at all anymore. At night, though, the strings glowed faintly in the dark. When she tried to ignore them, they pulled a little harder. Not sharp or violent, just steady, like something gently tugging her in one direction whether she wanted it or not.

Sometimes she sat on the floor beside her bed and stared at the threads, anger slowly building in her chest. Why did she still feel tied to someone who chose someone else? Her mind understood what happened. It knew the truth. But her heart seemed slower to catch up.

The pull grew stronger the day she heard about his new girlfriend. The pain didn’t explode the way she thought it might. Instead it settled deep inside her, heavy and quiet. Before she could really think about it, she found herself following the strings. Her feet carried her across sidewalks and through familiar streets, almost like the threads themselves were guiding her.

They led her to the park, the same park where he first kissed her and promised forever as if he actually understood what that word meant. The sky above it looked gray and still. And he was there. He sat on the old bench with her. The new girl leaned comfortably against him, laughing at something he said. His hand rested on her waist like it belonged there. Like it had always belonged there. Lena stopped walking. The strings inside her trembled slightly as she watched him. He looked happy.

That hurt more than anything else. Not guilty. Not confused. Just happy, like losing her hadn’t really mattered. Tears filled her eyes, but she didn’t look away. Some small part of her wanted him to notice her standing there, to feel the same pull she felt every night, to struggle with it the way she struggled. But he didn’t even glance up. If he had strings tied to her, they clearly didn’t pull the same way. That realization cut deeper than the cheating ever had.

The ache in her chest spread, but this time she didn’t try to push it away. She let herself feel everything. She grieved him, the future she used to imagine, and the girl she had been when she believed every word he said. The strings didn’t feel like love anymore. They felt like memory, proof that once she had loved someone with her whole heart.

After a while exhaustion washed over her. She felt tired of replaying old messages in her head, tired of wondering what she did wrong, tired of being pulled toward someone who had already let go. So she tried something different. She stopped holding on. She didn't rip the strings away or demand that they disappear. Instead she loosened her grip on the past and let the weight sit there without fighting it. The silver threads flickered. They didn't snap and they didn't vanish. Slowly they dimmed, their glow fading until they looked distant and thin, more like an old scar than a fresh wound. Her chest felt strangely empty, but lighter at the same time. She turned away from the bench and began walking again. Each step felt a little unsteady at first, but it also felt real. The pull behind her was faint now, more like background noise than a command.

Gravel crunched softly under her shoes as she reached the edge of the park. Behind her laughter continued, but it no longer pierced her chest the way it once had. Just as she stepped toward the sidewalk, a voice called out. "Lena?" he said, his voice unsure. She paused. The sound of her name brushed against her, gentle but no longer powerful. For a moment hope flickered inside her chest. Did he finally notice? Did he feel even a small piece of what she felt? The strings inside her stayed still. They didn't tighten and they didn't pull. They simply waited.

She took a slow breath. Some endings don't arrive with shouting or dramatic goodbyes. Sometimes they happen quietly, with acceptance, with the simple choice to keep moving forward even when a part of you still wants to turn around.

She didn't turn around.

The sound of her name faded behind her, carried away by the wind moving through the empty park. Lena kept walking, each step feeling steadier than the last. The strings still stretched somewhere behind her, but they were faint now, barely glowing against the evening sky. Maybe they would always exist in some small way, a reminder of who she used to be and how deeply she once loved. But they didn't control where she walked anymore.

Because sometimes the hardest part of moving on isn't leaving someone behind. It's realizing they stopped choosing you long before you finally chose yourself.

Jocelyn Goodspeed

Hays High School

11th Grade, 3rd Place (tie)

haysarts
council



112 E. 11th Street. . Hays, Kansas 67601
785-625-7522 . www.haysartscouncil.org