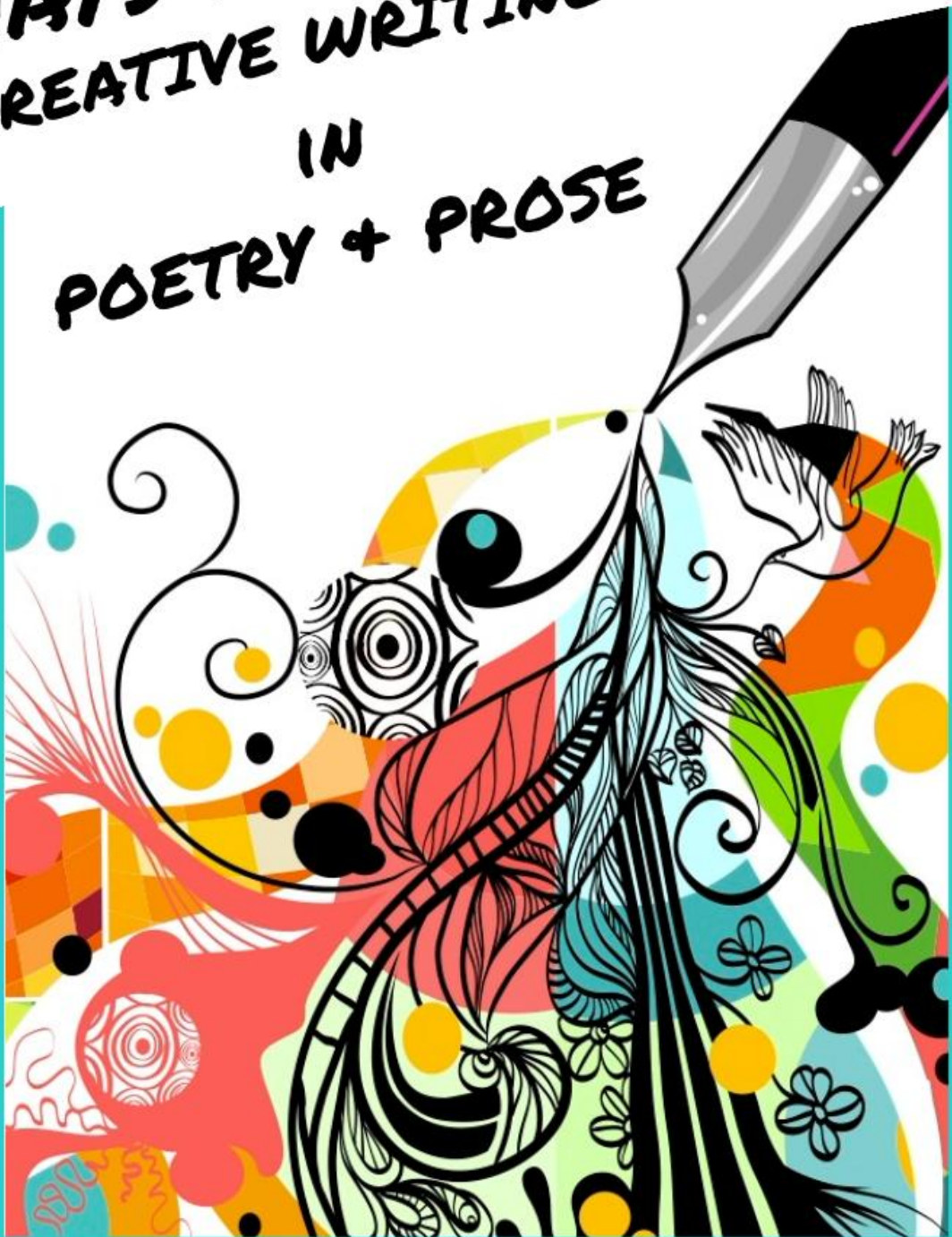


HAYS ARTS COUNCIL
CREATIVE WRITING AWARDS
IN
POETRY + PROSE



SPRING 2025



**THE HAYS ARTS COUNCIL
CREATIVE WRITING AWARDS
IN POETRY AND PROSE ~ 2025**

Dear Everyone,

I was privileged to help judge the K-12 Hays Arts Council Creative Writing Contest this year again and to serve as the chairperson in the Fort Hays State University English Department. The writing entries of 2025 were quality work for all the judges to read. It continues to amaze me, the level of the imagination of the writers behind these entries. All of the young writers have met the challenge of providing enthusiasm and quality in their work.

My thanks to everyone who took the time to be a part of this fantastic 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.

Also, I would like to express my utmost thanks to the following colleagues for taking the time to help judge the entries: Dr. Amanda Stinemetz, Linda McHenry, Linda Smith, Dr. Brett Weaver, Dr. Allison Bannister, Lisa Bell, 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 Toni Morrison once said, "If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." Let us all foster the fortitude and resolve that it takes to push forward and keep writing! Please enjoy the numerous creative pieces. Thank you.

Sincerely,

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

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The Hays Optimist Club
Friend of Youth

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2025 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	1	Chandler Miller	<i>Sister</i>	Washington	Ashley Dusin
K	2	Clara Serpan	<i>Peacock</i>	St. Mary's	Shelby Trickle
K	3	Emma Werth	<i>Kitten</i>	St. Mary's	Shelby Trickle
K	HM	Bryn Jimenez	<i>Cow</i>	St. Mary's	Shelby Trickle
1	1	Paisley Whisman	<i>Butterfly</i>	St. Mary's	Karla Bennett
1	2	Karsyn Bittel	<i>Dolphin</i>	St. Mary's	Karla Bennett
1	3 (tie)	Easton Schoenthaler	<i>Sailfish</i>	St. Mary's	Karla Bennett
1	3 (tie)	Noah Schield	<i>Tigers</i>	St. Mary's	Karla Bennett
2	1 (tie)	Shuze An	<i>Black Is...</i>	O'Loughlin	Kenda Leiker
2	1 (tie)	Aviana Gottschalk	<i>Lovely Day</i>	Holy Family	Cristy Dinkel
2	2 (tie)	Emmett Herl	<i>Owl and Mouse</i>	Victoria	Jessica Lang
2	2 (tie)	Olivia Arellano	<i>Seasons</i>	Holy Family	Cristy Dinkel
2	3 (tie)	Eli Brungardt	<i>About Time</i>	Holy Family	Cristy Dinkel
2	3 (tie)	Rhys Hillebrand	<i>My Dog Camie</i>	Roosevelt	Kenda Leiker
3	1	Tristen Johnson	<i>Dragon</i>	St. Mary's	Patty Meagher
3	2	Dawson Schmidtberger	<i>Softball</i>	Victoria	Brooklyn Pfeifer
3	3	Collin Schippers	<i>Fred and Ted</i>	Victoria	Brooklyn Pfeifer
3	HM	Brecklynn Fischer	<i>Races</i>	St. Mary's	Patty Meagher
4	1	Jace Leiker	<i>WWI</i>	Holy Family	Kallyn DeWitt
4	2	Michael Kitzman	<i>Victory</i>	St. Mary's	Payton Eck
4	3	Brielle Honas	<i>Clouds of White</i>	St. Mary's	Payton Eck
4	HM	Levi Geist	<i>Fall</i>	O'Loughlin	Sonya Herl, AJ Wilson
4	HM	Ainsley Haas	<i>Butterflies</i>	St. Mary's	Payton Eck
4	HM	Claire Lonnon	<i>Animals</i>	Holy Family	Kallyn DeWitt
5	1	Megan Emerson	<i>How Friends Help</i>	Wilson	Alicia Plante
5	2	Morgan Howland	<i>Everyone</i>	Washington	Emily Burd
5	3	Luna Hernandez	<i>Living</i>	Washington	Emily Burd
5	HM	Beckett Kitchen	<i>My Old Friends</i>	Wilson	Alicia Plante
6	1	Addisyn Karlin	<i>Love Before You Lose</i>	HMS	Sydney Niernberger
6	2	Aliyah Kinderknecht	<i>Seasons</i>	HMS	Sydney Niernberger
6	3	Caelyn Darrah	<i>Childhood</i>	HMS	Sydney Niernberger
6	HM	Katie Hines	<i>Weeping Willow</i>	Washington	Amy Kuppetz
7	1	Arianna Cantrell-Diaz	<i>I Wish I Were a Man</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
7	2	Leo Meitner	<i>Stride</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
7	3	Isabella Anderson	<i>You, I, We</i>	HMS	Rebecca Kuehl
7	HM	Kayla Schmeidler	<i>Picture Day</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose

8	1	Lily Basgall	<i>Time</i>	HMS	Megan Beiker
8	2	Avery Brown	<i>A Trip Down Memory Lane</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
8	3	Lexi Casey	<i>Falling</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
8	HM	Maddix Randa	<i>Rumbling Giants</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
8	HM	Kaycie Kennedy	<i>Dance</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
9	1	Emma Wasinger	<i>Country Side</i>	TMP-M	Chelsie Niehaus
9	2	Dylan Billinger	<i>Gleaming Tuba</i>	TMP-M	Chelsie Niehaus
9	3	Kobe Linenberger	<i>Upon the Faithful Heart of a Dog</i>	TMP-M	Chelsie Niehaus
11	1	Khandi Guzman	<i>The Cold Trail</i>	HHS	Dave Buller
11	2	Morgan Greenwood	<i>Mirage</i>	TMP-M	Travis Grizzell
11	3	Loren Tervort	<i>For My Girl Dad</i>	HHS	Dave Buller
12	1	Clare Tholstrup	<i>The End</i>	HHS	Jerry Braun
12	2	Keaton Fisher	<i>a pile of viscera called Hope</i>	EHS	April Reed
12	3	Haylea Heslet	<i>Seasonal Heartbreak</i>	HHS	Kathy Wagoner

2024 Creative Writing Winning Entries ~ *Poetry*

SISTER

Sweet
Ideas
Silly
Together
Excited
Rhyme

Chandler Miller
Washington Grade School
Kindergarten, 1st Place

Peacock

Peacock
Beautiful, colors, feathers, shiny
blue, black, beak

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

Cow

Cow
Moo, spots, utters, nice,
tail, four legs, milk

Bryn Jimenez
St. Mary's Grade School
Kindergarten, Honorable Mention

Kitten

Kitten
Small, paws, tail, ears
eyes, mouth, meow

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

Butterfly

Blue
Up in the sky
Teal
Two wings
Eats nectar
Red
Flowers
Looks pretty
Yellow

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

Dolphin

Dive
Ocean animal
Leap
Plays with toys
Have babies
In shows
Needs water

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

Sailfish

Sneaky
Actively
It lives in the sea
Looks dangerous
Fast
It can dive deep
Sailfin
Hungry

Easton Schoenthaler

St. Mary's Grade School

1st Grade, 3rd Place (tie)

Tigers

They're sneaky
It lives on land
Good hunters
Eats meat
Really fast runners
Smart

Noah Schield

St. Mary's Grade School

1st Grade, 3rd Place (tie)

Black is . . .

Black is the dark scary night on the other side of my bedroom wall.
Black is the tasty dark chocolate Hershey bar melting in my mouth.
Black is hard charcoal burning and smoking in the hot grill.
Black is a hungry panther creeping in a bush for its prey.
Black is a watermelon seed that next summer will be on my plate to eat.
Black is the silence of a gravity filled black hole.
And black is the empty feeling I get from losing a family member.

Shuze An

O'Loughlin Elementary

2nd Grade, 1st Place (tie)

Owl and Mouse

The owl is flying
Snow is soft as a pillow
The owl finds a mouse

Emmett Herl

Victoria Elementary

2nd Grade, 2nd Place (tie)

Lovely Day

I wake after dreaming.
Outside,
it smells lovely.
The day goes by.
The bluebirds start to sing a song,
and all the butterflies flutter melodies, too.
The rainbow goes around and around.
Through the world it goes.
How lovely is God's creation!

Aviana Gottschalk

Holy Family Elementary

2nd Grade, 1st Place (tie)

Seasons

Meadowlarks tweet songs.
Yellow leaves fall off the trees.
Winter's coming soon.

Olivia Arellano

Holy Family Elementary

2nd Grade, 2nd place (tie)

My Dog Camie

I have a dog named Camie,
Her fur is smooth and white.
She loves to play fetch outside.
When protecting us, she might bite.

She is a big German shepherd,
Who is only 3 years old.
Preferring to be an oversized lap dog,
Who is easily controlled.

Scratching her ears and chin is her favorite.
When I come home, she wags her tail
In hopes for a crunchy bone,
Begging for human food, she usually will prevail.

Rhys Hillebrand

Roosevelt Elementary
2nd Grade, 3rd Place (tie)

Dragon

Dragon
Scary Sounding
Creepy Feisty Flyer
Loudly Fierce Shooting Flames
Reptile

Tristen Johnson

St. Mary's Grade School
3rd Grade, 1st Place

Fred and Ted

There was a superhero named Fred
He found a pet named Ted
They went to the city
To save his kitty
It was too late, he was dead

Collin Schippers

Victoria Elementary
3rd Grade, 3rd Place

About Time!

Get the dime,
But don't forget the time.
You can try to rhyme,
But don't forget the time.
If you forget the dime,
You will commit a crime.
Don't forget the time.
This is just a funny rhyme.

Eli Brungardt

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

Softball

Softball is fun
Especially in the sun
The ball goes in a mitt
The ball is meant to be hit

Dawson Schmidtberger

Victoria Elementary
3rd Grade, 2nd Place

Races

Races
Flying Faster
Recess Winner Looser
Hurry Blurry Fastest Winner
Contest

Brecklynn Fischer

St. Mary's Grade School
3rd Grade, Honorable Mention

WWI

Bodies everywhere,
broken vehicles,
shattered windows,
guns, swords, and knives,
piled magazines.

Blood on my helmet
and on my hands.

Sunset colored bombs,
tanks,
grenades,
jets of apple green,
poisonous gas,
and ammo,
scattered medical junk,
radios on dead people's bodies.

Five years I was battling,
hiding,
struggling to survive.
Through the woods, I army crawl.
German bullets barely miss my body.

Every second of my life
flashes before my eyes.
But I am lucky.
Murky water covers me.
They can't see me.

I swim away.

I feel safe now.
Where do I go?
I survived.

Jace Leiker

Holy Family Elementary
4th Grade, 1st Place

Butterflies

A glimmer of color in the wind
Peaceful wings on a blossom
Free as the blue skies above

Dancing and twirling in the sky
Sunset on the horizon
Mother and daughter

Pink, blue, and orange
Fade into the night sky

Ainsley Haas

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

Victory

Blindfolded, dark, an impossible shot
The ball flies through the air
Another miss, anger grows

One more go, it has to go in
The ball glides onto the rim
It's there, it's in, it's not

Another miss, anger grows

This is the one, another miss
Last one, anger grows
Has to be it!

Another miss, anger grows

Please this one
The ball flies through the hoop
Celebration, shouts, victory

Michael Kitzman

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

Clouds of White

The warm sun shining so bright
Golden and hot digging into your feet
Warm sand, blue skies, clouds of white
Waves rolling in, making a steady beat

Seashells appear, silent as a mouse
All to myself, the wind whistles in my ear
Building a sand castle tall and big as a house
Walking the beach watching the birds fly near

Watching my kite fly so high into the sky
Twirling and spinning in such delight
Shutting my eyes and letting out a big sigh
Watching the stars shine bright in the night

Brielle Honas

St. Mary's Grade School
4th Grade, 3rd Place

Fall

Football
Milo
Planting wheat
Waiting...
Waiting...
Waiting...
Waiting for the gold that arrives
Hmmm...HMMMMMMMMMMMMM...
The crawling combine cuts the golden wheat
Fall is my favorite!

Levi Geist

O'Loughlin Elementary

4th Grade, Honorable Mention

Everyone

Everyone is in a crowd of someone who has been
Depressed about a small thing.
Everyone is in a crowd of someone who is
Scared of losing their parents in a grocery store or restaurant.
Everyone is in a crowd of someone who doesn't know how to
Handle their anxiety and is scared of telling others what
They're going through. But if you are someone who
Doesn't know how to handle something, just trust someone else
To handle your problems better than you.

Morgan Howland

Washington Grade School

5th Grade, 2nd Place

Animals

From the birds in the sky
to the fish in the sea –
Oh, how I love animals!
Just you wait and see.

From the owls in the night sky
to the rabbits in their holes –
Oh, how I love animals!
Just you wait and see.

From the butterflies in the sky
to the worms in the dirt –
Oh, how I love animals!
Just you wait and see.

From the dogs in the yard
to the cats in the street –
Oh, how I love animals!
Just you wait and see.

From the fish in the tank
to the sharks in the sea –
Oh, how I love animals!
Just you wait and see.

Claire Lonnon

Holy Family Elementary

4th Grade, Honorable Mention

How Friends Help

Friends help when you are lost in the woods
They put a hand on your shoulder and say it is all right
They will guide you back to their house and treat you with goods
You soon fall asleep in the cozy bed at night
A few hours later, you wake up from a nightmare
In a sweat and heart beating fast, you yell "EEA!!!"
And in a split second, your friend will be there
You hug your friend and tell them you were blind and could not see
And in the kindest voice, they say, "I made breakfast, and I hope it cheers you up"
You walk out of bed and plop in a chair
Then your friend hands you an ice-cold cup
You take a drink and say, "You're the best, you really do care"
They thank you and sit on the other side of the table
With a smile, they say, "I am glad that you are here, and I can tell you a fable"

Megan Emerson

Wilson Elementary

5th Grade, 1st Place

My Old Friend

I once had a friend that was really nice to me
We always went geocaching together
We both loved the song "Can't Touch This"
We'd dance to it all day long
We would play Legos for hours and hours
Trying to build the greatest towers
He would help me make the base
I just watched and learned
And to this day, I still can do it
He didn't get mad when I took forever
Just to put two blocks together
He never got mad, it wasn't him
I just wish he was still here with us
But sadly, he passed on
He wasn't the guy to yell at someone
He wouldn't, even if he was mad
He really, really liked the Dodgers
He was the nicest person in the world
There was no doubt about it
This is all that I know about him
I wish he could see what I'm doing
Right in this very moment

Beckett Kitchen

Wilson Elementary

5th Grade, Honorable Mention

Living

Roses are red violets are blue.
That's a simple one, but so are you.
You listen but you don't hear.
You talk but you don't understand.
You love but you don't.
You see, but you're blinded by the truth.
You sit but you try to stand.
You give up but you keep on trying.
You're really just living.

Luna Hernandez

Washington Grade School

5th Grade, 3rd Place

Childhood

As we grow up, we learn to walk
And how to talk
Then we go to school and learn a lot more
But we also learn how to cry, have empathy, and hide our emotions
People say growing up is a blessing, but I think growing up is lonely
Because once you are fully grown the world seems to get dark
When we get old, we lose our beauty and then we start to lose our hope
But when you are old and grey, you think what was the purpose of my life?
And then when you die and go to heaven, you'll finally realize there is a purpose for your life
You just have to understand it.

Caelyn Darrah

Hays Middle School

6th Grade, 3rd Place

Love Before You Lose

Sometimes I feel alone, like there is nothing left for me.
I know I'm not free.
Those thoughts burn.
It feels like I am a small leaf, and everyone else is a tree.
Everyone is bigger and better,
I always thought that tiny things like a leaf don't matter.
But slowly I realized leaves grow on trees.
And if I one day want to fly away, I must grow.
I am just as important as a tree.
One day I will fly.
I will fly free.
Nobody will stop me once I become free.
I will sway in the wind, just like a tree does.
I will plant myself on the ground, I will be free.
But one day I will miss being held high.
I will miss not being tossed in the wind.
I will miss not having to be alone.
I will miss being held.
I will one day miss not having someone, one day.
We must love, before we lose.
Even if you feel stuck, does not mean you are.

Addisyn Karlin
Hays Middle School
6th Grade, 1st Place

Weeping Willow

It sways in the summer leaves
Emerald green.
In the winter, it's bare no
Happiness seen.

It waits and waits for
A friend to find it. But year
After year, it is still and alone
With no friends or a place to call
Home of their own.

Slowly as it cries and cries,
The love that it had becomes
Bone dry.
Now there as it stands still,
Weeping, it realizes it has
Nothing in life worth keeping.

Katie Hines
Washington Grade School
6th Grade, Honorable Mention

Seasons

It was a frigid winter day
I wanted to play
But I had to stay inside
With my brother by my side
Finally my mom let me go outside
With my brother still by my side
We played in the snow
In the snow there was a beautiful glow

It was a beautiful spring day
With lots of flowers in my way
Parents are gardening outside
Unlike my brother and I
We enjoy watching birds as they fly away
But soon the birds make us want them to go away
As we try to sleep
With their chirping

It was a burning summer day
All kids want to do is play
In the pool that makes the heat go away
Me and my brother stay up later
As the sun stays up longer
We enjoy not going to school
And we make sure our summer is cool
With the delightful summer feeling

It was a cool fall day
With the leaves turning color
No more kids outside to play
They are all starting their school days
My brother starting elementary school
While I am starting middle school
Kids are not excited
But the leaves are overjoyed dancing off the tree

Aliyah Kinderknecht
Hays Middle School
6th Grade, 2nd Place

I Wish I Were A Man

Today, I decided to go on a walk.
It wasn't different from any other time, of course.
I wore my favorite pink blouse,
and my favorite black shorts,
since it was rather warm outside.
As I walked, I got catcalled and followed.
Sometimes, I wish I were a man.

I went on another walk today, and I hoped
It'd be better than yesterday.
I wore my baggiest clothes despite the intense heat.
As I stepped one by one,
everybody I passed made comments,
"Why are you hiding yourself?"
Sometimes, I wish I were a man.

This time when I forced my way to school,
I wore my regular school uniform.
My skirt was two inches above the knees
and I wore long crew socks.
What happened this time?
I got called names.
Names that nobody would ever have to hear.
I really wish I were a man.

When I stepped to school today, I wore my older brother's uniform,
his giant dress shirt hiding my small frame.
Despite everything I tried, nothing had changed.
Deep down I knew something.
I wished deep down in my heart that I were a man,
because then I knew that these cruel names and actions would stop.
That doesn't happen to men,
Right?

Arianna Cantrell-Diaz

TMP-Marian Jr. High

7th Grade, 1st Place

Stride

Running is easy after the hard
Running is fun after the bad
Running is winning after the losing
Running is fast after the slow
Running gets easier yard after yard
Running is all I will ever know

Running is fans after the alone
Running is who I know best
Running is like an old friend or a distant relative
Running can sometimes be too competitive
Running is who I turn to when in need
Running is true and far
Just what I need.

Leo Meitner

TMP-Marian Jr. High

7th Grade, 2nd Place

You, I, We

You can cry
You can scream
You can try
But
You won't
Be
Seen
Look
I can tell
I can tattle
But
I'm the one who gets in
Trouble
Speak
We can protest
We can prattle
But
Society doesn't help
Kids in
Trouble
Help
Help me
Help you
Do the thing
Nobody else will do

Isabella Anderson

Hays Middle School

7th Grade, 3rd Place

Picture Day

The alarm blares loud as I click snooze once more
I hope it's not too late as I'm rushing out my bedroom door!
I take a look in the mirror, my hair is a mess
It's picture day, and I am already stressed!

I rush downstairs, no time to eat
Then I hear the bus's horn go Beep!
I give my mom a quick hug goodbye
It's picture day, and I want to cry!

I get to school and take my spot in the line
I wonder when the turn will be mine.
I step on the stool with an unsure smile on my face
It's picture day, and I'm not feeling too great!

As she takes my picture the bright light goes flash
I feel like my heart is going to crash!
I see the results and I feel relieved
It's picture day, and look what I have achieved!

Kayla Schmeidler
TMP-Marian Jr. High
7th Grade, Honorable Mention

Time

A time we live in.
A day we survive.
The clock ticks, numerals divine.

Out of our reach the sand slips speedily to our dismay.
We think we are infinite.
Nothing can stop humanity's glow.
When the clock starts ticking again,
And the fire burns faster,
Will you finally realize how cold your heart is?

What day do we live in?
What a time we *survive*.
Our clock is ticking,
The hands...
Out of line.

Lily Basgall
Hays Middle School
8th Grade, 1st Place

Falling

As I tiptoe through the hazy forest,
I try not to shatter the fragile silence.
I walk through the valleys and the hills,
I soar through the mountains, deserts, and oceans.
Time stops as I feel like a grain of sand on this Earth,
this tiny grain of sand slipping and falling down,
deeper into the dark endless hole I slip,
the darkness takes over as I remember the sun and moon,
the rush it gave me to see.
Now, I'm just a fading star,
out of sight and mind,
then I wake up

Lexi Casey
TMP-Marian Jr. High
8th Grade, 3rd Place

Dance

A step, a spin, a fleeting flight.
Bodies speak where words give light.
Rhythm sings, the soul takes flight,
In dance, we feel so very right.

Dance is a language that speaks from the soul,
Where our minds lose all control.
With each graceful step, we cast off our cares,
In the rhythm of life, we float through the air.

No words are needed, just rhythm and rhyme,
Let the music take you, it'll be a good time.

Kaycie Kennedy
TMP-Marian Jr. High
8th Grade, Honorable Mention

A Trip Down Memory Lane

Something about our childhood brings things back to us,
some consist of smiling memories and some consist of fuss.
There are many things we remember as we grow older,
such as the holidays we celebrated and the air growing colder.

Many holidays were celebrated in the houses of this town,
but as our family left, we began the countdown.
For the next time we would see them would feel like ages,
but this time there would be some changes.

We all grew up and started to see each other less,
because many people would soon be filled with stress.
We all hit milestones at different times,
it is now just your close family to spend your past times

We're busy now,
not much time anymore somehow.
We stay up late and make great memories,
for what would feel like centuries.

When we stay up on these very late nights,
we watch TV and read books in the light.
But all this must come to a halt,
when your childhood must be put in the vault.

Avery Brown
TMP-Marian Jr. High
8th Grade, 2nd Place

Country Side

Beneath the clouds the wind forever blows.
Birds chirp loud as the sun awakes each day.
The rolling hills and countryside will glow;
Each blade of grass softly sways back in May.

No city walls to cage the heart or mind.
Animals are free to roam where they be.
There is nothing here that is underlined.
Fields stretch out so far you can't even see.

In open spaces where my spirit flies,
I find the joy the crowded world forgets.
My heart will forever be in these skies;
Time spent here will never make me regret.

Through this beautiful place I've found peace;
Don let them make this place become deceased.

Emma Wasinger
TMP-Marian High School
9th Grade, 1st Place

Rumbling Giants

Mighty trucks, with engines strong
Rumble down the highways, all day long.
Their tires hum, a steady beat
As they haul their loads, with steady feet.

With chrome accents, shining bright
They glide across the morning light.
Their diesel engines roar, a familiar sound
That echoes through cities, all around.

From dusty rigs, to sleek designs,
Trucks come in shapes, and varied lines.
Some carry goods, with careful might,
While others tow, day and night.

So here's to trucks, and all they do,
Keeping our world, moving anew.
May their engines purr, and tires roll,
Rumbling forever, with a steady soul.

Maddix Randa
TMP-Marian Jr. High
8th Grade, Honorable

Gleaming Tuba

Oh mighty tuba, low and bold you sing;
Your voice commands the instruments around,
A low, thundering voice, on which hearts cling
In halls where thunderous echoes shake the ground.

Your gleaming, golden curves are renowned.
The massive bell which makes the most great sounds.
Turning the heads, Greatly shaking the grounds.
Ruling the band, always in the mounds.

It is not always standing at the top,
For it has finesse, it can quiet up.
Always for the greater good it stops,
For it's the best, it doesn't have to strut.

Tuba, Tuba, on the wall, who's the best
Of them all? It is I, more than the rest.

Dylan Billinger

TMP-Marian High School
9th Grade, 2nd Place

Upon the Faithful Heart of a Dog

Oh noble hound with fur so soft and bright,
Thou wagging tail cheers the darkest of days,
And loyal heart a beacon in the night
To guide your master when he's lost his way.

Your bark may be but soft, yet pure and true.
A voice that sounds of love without disguise
In every step your heart so warm and true,
A soul that splits between the starry skies.

Though small in size your spirit shows no bound,
With loyalty that swells within your chest.
You seek not wealth nor jewelry or crown,
But in love of man, you try thou very best.

So, faithful dog thy love will always stay
A noble friend to be seen far away.

Kobe Linenberger

TMP-Marian High School
9th Grade, 3rd Place

The Cold Trail

A lonely trail in empty cold
The dreary sky stretched thin, not bold
I pass powdered hills
Curving and twisting, to not get chills
Woven in the snow, I envy it
An animal's end shown in way of a stain, it was hit
My gait never stops
A heavy-duty jacket rests upon my shoulders, it never drops
Shielding me from the winter air
It screams, telling me to go back, full of despair
To not see what will lie before me
Ignorance is the worst feeling to have outdoors, you should never flee
The sight before me, I would've never imagined
The way the body was fashioned
Chunks gone, fur too
It causes me to go blue
The little lamb was present
But it was not the who passed
It had feasted on the big bad wolf

Khandi Guzman

Hays High School
11th Grade, 1st Place

For My Girl Dad

What do I do? They mutter as they prepare the nursery
What do I do? They ask as they cut the cake open and their wife beams
What do I do with a girl? They whisper as their newborn baby screams

On behalf of daughters everywhere, I'll tell you what to do
You go to every concert, meet, and game
You sit in the front row and show her that you're there
Whether you blow a flashing neon buzzer
Or wear her favorite color

You pick her up when she scrapes her knee
And you hold her tight in your arms
And you tell her it's okay to cry
And then you tell her it's okay to cry
And that you'll never let her bail

When she tells you that she's tired of playing the game of life
When she tells you she's scared or not good enough
You gather her up in your arms
And remind her that she can do hard things
And then you throw her back in the ring

And at the end of the day
When she comes home all dirty and tired
From showing the world that she's tough as nails
You call her princess and hold her tight
And tell her you'll always be her knight

Now not all girls are the same, I'll give you that
But you'll figure it out
So on behalf of daughters everywhere
The next time someone asks "What do I do with a girl?"
Tell them to celebrate

Loren Tervort

Hays High School

11th Grade, 3rd Place

Mirage

I drank from the river,
It turned into sand.
You faded away
When I touched your hand.

Thought I made a friend.
It was my reflection.
I should have noticed
The lack of perfection.

The flowers I held
Hid their sharp thorns.
My fingers were plucked
From their vicious scorns.

Everything changes.
I stay the same.
They don't give me pleasure,
So I don't give them names.

My dear mirage,
I'll say goodbye
Before we meet
And open my eyes.

Morgan Greenwood

TMP-Marian High School

11th Grade, 2nd Place

The End

I showed you my secret
Monet collection
And you laughed like it wasn't art
I gave you the key to
My favorite greenhouse
And you threw rocks into the glass walls
You trampled all over
My wild daisies
Because you claimed they weren't flowers

Now I keep my ancient texts
Hidden from any guests
And keep all the keys in the crypt
I have no trust at all
Except for my own self
And ghosts that haunt these empty halls

You wrote me letters
Of only pure malice
And expected me to bow to your will
You critiqued my dresses
And laughed at your poor choices
Like I'd find your rude jokes so charming

I've learned to check locks
And I listen to knocks
Before opening the door for just anyone
You made me replace the glass
And put up stone walls instead
But I hold no vengeance for you

I hope you appreciate
Somebody's paintings
And flowers, and books, and gardens
I hope you don't hold what they love
Or what you gave
Against them in any context
I hope you grow
From the weeds in your soul
And I hope we can both make amends
Until then I'll write down
These words to get it out
And release your old demon in me
And someday if we cross paths
And can move past all that
Maybe we can rewrite "The End"

Clare Tholstrup
Hays High School
12th Grade, 1st Place

Seasonal Heartbreak

You say I have time,
To find what just might be mine.
As the days turn to night,
I can't help but feel fright!

While spring is near,
The leaves begin to appear.
Reminds me of when you left,
Which should've been a theft!

My heart in a jumble,
Makes my insides crumble.
Summer flew by,
And I could only sigh.

Next thing you know,
It began to snow.
My heart, cold as ice,
Oh, how I paid the price!

Time is just a word,
That can often go unheard.
My heart behind bars,
Is full of unwanted battle scars.

Haylea Heslet
Hays High School
12th Grade, 3rd Place

a pile of viscera called Hope

Hope is a pile of viscera on the floor, gored and mangled.
you were *tasked* to save Hope.
Hope is a pile of viscera on the floor. forgotten and abandoned.
you were tasked to *save* Hope.
Hope is a pile of viscera on the floor. forsaken and broken.
you were tasked to save *Hope*.

you failed that task. but, you don't feel bad. Hope is dead. Hope is lost. despaired. destroyed.
you told Hope you'd save her. save her from her prison.

look how well that turned out for you.

as you were saving her, getting her out of her prison, a thought came into your mind.
not a thought. an *urge*.

a new task.

you haven't forsaken *Hope*. Hope has forsaken *you*.
as you were running away from her prison, Hope on your heels, your mind drifted.
when has Hope ever been on your side?
years and years wasted. dreaming and hoping.
so, why are you risking your life for something that never helped you out?
risking your life for *Hope*?
it's laughable.

it wasn't fair, you decided.
you don't owe Hope *anything*.
you turn around, facing Hope.
the exit to Hope's freedom meters behind you.
you're the only thing standing in Hope's way.

you lost all Hope, so you decided everyone else should too
you draw your blade, staring at Hope in the eyes.
you lunge.

you leave the prison. you leave one thing behind.

a pile of viscera called Hope.

Keaton Fisher
Ellis High School
12th Grade, 2nd Place

2025 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	1	Hazel Brull	<i>Castle</i>	Washington	Ashley Dusin
K	2	Chandler Miller	<i>Birthday Party</i>	Washington	Ashley Dusin
K	3	Donny Keimig	<i>Sandcastle</i>	Washington	Ashley Dusin
K	HM	Flora Hadle	<i>Zoo</i>	Washington	Ashley Dusin
1	1 (tie)	Lyla Nuttle	<i>Fish and Marshmallows</i>	Washington	Kelsie McMillan
1	1 (tie)	Kymber Talkington	<i>The Travel Land</i>	Washington	Kelsie McMillan
1	2	Cayden Pritchett	<i>A Walk in the Woods</i>	Washington	Kelsie McMillan
1	3	Everly McClung	<i>Treasure Hunt</i>	Washington	Kelsie McMillan
2	1 (tie)	Nolan Reed	<i>WW2 Doggy</i>	St. Mary's	Karen Whisman
2	1 (tie)	Raewyn Schmeidler	<i>The Case of the Odd Colored Flamingo</i>	Roosevelt	Kenda Leiker
2	2 (tie)	Reagan Deutscher	<i>The Dancing Dog</i>	St. Mary's	Karen Whisman
2	2 (tie)	Avri Kroeger	<i>Lily's New Family</i>	St. Mary's	Karen Whisman
2	3	Emersyn Gaschler	<i>The Dancing Cat</i>	St. Mary's	Karen Whisman
3	1	Leah Hillebrand	<i>A True Book Connection</i>	Roosevelt	Kenda Leiker
3	2	Ryken Mayfield	<i>A Day to Remember</i>	Wilson	Kenda Leiker
3	3	Gideon Tillman	<i>The Food Kingdom Island</i>	Lincoln	Kenda Leiker
3	HM	McKinley Wertenberger	<i>Lily's Adventure</i>	Wilson	Leslie Karlin
4	1	Kersee Wince	<i>Whispers and Walls</i>	Lincoln	Hannah Wince
4	2	Kersee Wince	<i>The Phantom Prank</i>	Lincoln	Hannah Wince
4	3	Cambree Schmidt	<i>A Swimming Secret</i>	O'Loughlin	Hannah Wince
4	HM	Evelyn Bryant	<i>Untitled</i>	O'Loughlin	Sonya Herl, AJ Wilson
4	HM	Afton Augustine	<i>The Great Gorillas</i>	Wilson	Rebecca Summers
4	HM	Bryce Irwin	<i>Untitled</i>	O'Loughlin	Sonya Herl, AJ Wilson
4	HM	Josslyn Dreiling	<i>That Ride</i>	Wilson	Rebecca Summers
5	1	Nigel Williams	<i>Squirks</i>	Wilson	Hannah Wince
5	2	Laeci Rome	<i>The Roller Coaster</i>	O'Loughlin	Denise Danielson
5	3	Griffin Dietz	<i>The A.I. Teacher</i>	O'Loughlin	Hannah Wince
5	HM	Oliver Buckstead	<i>The Intergalactic Odyssey</i>	O'Loughlin	Hannah Wince
6	1	Mila Womack	<i>Wendigo: Hunter of the Nights</i>	HMS	Gabbie Otte
6	2	Ryleigh Kuehl	<i>Genesis Allies</i>	HMS	Gabbie Otte
6	3	Gianna Ochoa	<i>Friends Beyond Color</i>	TMP-M JH	Holly Lang
6	HM	Rayna LaFond	<i>The Unexpected Storm</i>	HMS	Sydney Niernberger
7	1	Arianna Cantrell-Diaz	<i>A Lot Can Happen in Two Minutes</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
7	2	Avryn Beiker	<i>The Perseverance of Jett Johnson</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
7	3	Louden Schumacher	<i>The Right People</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
7	HM	Mason Lonnon	<i>Goodbye</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose

8	1	Mason Rozean	<i>The Dreamer</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
8	2	Jayde Durham	<i>You Were My Everything</i>	HMS	Amy Schmidt
8	3	Ashlen Lang	<i>Facing Fears</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
8	HM	Caroline Purinton	<i>Mystery at the Beach House</i>	TMP-M JH	Brenda Rose
9	1	Aspen Holmes	<i>Nxyaris</i>	VHS	Conor Nicholl
9	2	Zoe Dinges	<i>Detailed Moment</i>	VHS	Conor Nicholl
9	3	Conner Toon	<i>Guitars with Mr. Woolf</i>	VHS	Conor Nicholl
10	1	Macie Herrman	<i>Skin</i>	HHS	Jessica Clingan
10	2	Isaiah Burkholder	<i>Blackwood Sanitorium</i>	HHS	Jerry Braun
10	3	Grace Nelson	<i>Kingdoms Divided</i>	HHS	Jessica Clingan
11	1	Maci Vanek	<i>The Longest Drive</i>	HHS	Dave Buller
11	2	Loren Tervort	<i>The Tragedy</i>	HHS	Dave Buller
11	3	Lucy Tippy	<i>Maya</i>	HHS	Dave Buller
11	HM	Savannah Clingan	<i>And They Never Knew...</i>	HHS	Dave Buller
12	1	Karley Schlautman	<i>Henchmen with Benefits</i>	HHS	Kathy Wagoner
12	2	Keaton Fisher	<i>the stars are eternal</i>	EHS	April Reed
12	3	Noah Martinson	<i>No One Knows</i>	HHS	Kathy Wagoner

2025 Creative Writing Winning Entries ~ *Prose*

Castle

There once was a witch that was making potions in her castle. As she was making her favorite potion she spills it all over the floor. She gets some napkins to clean up the mess. As she was cleaning up the mess she realizes that one of the napkins is actually a secret map. The secret map takes her to a new secret castle. In the new castle she found a lot of new potions that she can make. She is so excited and lives happily ever after in her new castle trying out all the new potions.

Hazel Brull

Washington Grade School

Kindergarten, 1st place

Birthday Party

Once there was a princess mermaid that was having a birthday party. She got on her phone and called the mom unicorn to see if the little unicorn can come to the party. The little unicorn was watching TV when the mermaid called and was excited to go to the party. It was a pool party in the ocean. They had a real cake with cupcakes. The mermaid was turning three years old. The little unicorn gift to the mermaid was unicorn walkie-talkies. This way they can talk to each other whenever they wanted.

Chandler Miller

Washington Grade School

Kindergarten, 2nd place

Sandcastle

Frankenstein was in a park and he was playing. He was playing in the sand and was making a sandcastle when a tornado came. He ran back to his haunted house. There he hid under his bed until the storm was over. He went back to the park to finish his sandcastle.

Donny Keimig

Washington Elementary

Kindergarten, 3rd place

Zoo

Once there was a chef that worked at the zoo. She wanted to give a surprise gift to the zookeeper. The gift was a pillow and a card. She wanted to give her a pillow so she can sleep at the zoo. She loves working at the zoo.

Flora Hadle

Washington Elementary

Kindergarten, Honorable Mention

Fish and Marshmallows

There was a blue, pink, and purple fish named Ralph. He lived in the ocean. He swam through some seaweed and he found himself going through a portal and ended up in a world made of marshmallows. He could still swim around because the water was still there. But the water in the marshmallow world made him turn gold. He found different kinds of fish. They were not gold. They were blue and green and purple. He swam around and the portal closed but they wanted to go back home. They were stuck in the marshmallow world! They waited for a couple of days and the portal opened back up. When he went back he was still gold and he still had his friends. They all played together and soon a shark came and wanted to be their friend too. They let the shark play with them. While they were playing, marshmallows started to pop out of the ground. They ate the marshmallows, but then they started to feel sick. Ralph told his friends he did not feel good and said maybe we should jump on them instead of eating them. They started jumping but one of the fish fell off and bumped his head. Then they decided that they would rather live in the marshmallow world so they found the portal again and lived happily ever after.

Lyla Nuttle

Washington Grade School

1st Grade, 1st Place (tie)

The Travel Land

There once was a princess whose name was Rose. It was bedtime and Rose was scared of the dark. She ran to her mom and dad and they said there was no reason to be scared of the dark. They took her back to bed and snuggled her in. The next morning when she woke up, she found a door that was not there last night. She went to get her mom and dad to show them the door, but when they came back, they couldn't see it. She tried to show it to her brother and sister, but they couldn't see it either. She tried to show it to 3 other people but no one could see it except for her. She tried to go through the door, but it was locked. She looked everywhere for a key and found one under her bed. She put it in the door and it opened and she went through. When she went through, she found another door and that door led to a world full of candy. There were candy cane houses and chocolate chip cookie trees. As she was walking around, she found a dog that must have gotten trapped there. She decided the dog would be her dog. She named her Cookie. Rose and Cookie were walking together and found another door that led them to a world full of milk. There were waterfalls of milk and the houses were made of frozen milk. There were 3 kittens and a horse on a milk farm. She wanted all of them to be her pets. When they were all together, they entered another door that led them to a beach. Here they made a house and stayed for a while. When night came Rose got scared of the dark again and she felt better when she snuggled with her pets. One day she found a door that led her back to her home. When she went through, her mom and dad were finally able to see the door. Her parents were able to visit her in her beach home and see all of her animals. She had even found a turtle and her babies to adopt. One day when the princess was walking, she saw a prince come through a new door. He had a horse with him and they decided to get married and have a baby and named her Flower Rose. When the baby turned one, the prince and princess got the baby a horse so they could all ride together.

Kymber Talkington

Washington Grade School

1st Grade, 1st Place (tie)

A Walk in the Woods

There was a dog and a prince and they were walking in the woods. They saw a magic door and tried to go in. The door was locked. There was a key laying on the ground and they brought it to the door. They opened the door and it sucked them in. They didn't know where they were. They realized they were in outer space. There were some aliens on the moon. They went over and tried to make friends with them. The aliens were very nice and they got to play on the moon. Soon the prince and the dog wanted to go home so they went to find the door. It was locked again. They tried to use the key but it didn't work. They found out that it actually wasn't their door, their door was on the left. They put the key in and the door sucked them back home.

Cayden Pritchett

Washington Grade School

1st Grade, 2nd Place

Treasure Hunt

Once there was a mermaid. Her name was Ariadne. She and her fish friend went swimming where the sharks live and they went in to the shark's house. The sharks told them they could come inside and take their treasure. There were gems, crowns, rings, and lots of shiny stuff. They took it home and there was so much that she had to put some in her room and some in her mom and dad's room. They got mad because they had just cleaned the house. Everyone cleaned up all the rooms and they were happy forever.

Everly McClung

Washington Grade School

1st Grade, 3rd Place

WW2 Doggy

In WW2 there was a dog named Taco. He helped hurt men on Omaha Beach. He brought med-kits to hurt people. The bunkers were shooting at them, it was crazy! So he ran away to the trenches and met a new dog named Stubby. Then a bad guy came in and Stubby ran at him and bit him and then Mike, who is Taco's owner came in and shot the bad guy. Then they got out of the trenches and it seemed like all the bad guys were dead. Stubby started to sniff the air and the beach had no bad men so they went to the bunkers to check if there were any bad people left. Two years later Mike gave Taco and Stubby a treat.

Nolan Reed

St. Mary's Grade School

2nd Grade, 1st Place (tie)

The Case of the Odd-Colored Flamingo

My family and I went to the Rolling Hills Zoo on a sunny day. First, we saw the hyenas, then we saw the lions, and then later, the pink flamingos. By the pond there was a random red and black-dotted flamingo. I thought it was weird and noticed the other pink flamingos kept moving away from the red and black-dotted flamingo. The others were busy eating the brine shrimp. However, this flamingo was eating by herself and chirped and whimpered. She seemed so sad. So, we asked if the zookeepers knew what was wrong. They didn't know either. It was such a mystery.

I searched for clues that would explain why she was red and black. I knew from reading books that flamingos turn the color of whatever they eat. So, it could be as simple as this flamingo eating the wrong thing. . something that was red and black. Now I just had to figure it out and search the area.

I quickly glanced around the area for anything that could be red and black. When I got closer to the flamingo pond enclosure, I saw that there were lady bugs everywhere. That's when the lightbulb in my head went off. Maybe the red and black-dotted flamingo ate ladybugs! We quickly told the workers and after some investigating, it turned out to be true. The workers immediately started working to get rid of the ladybugs. They knew that lady bugs were attracted to marigolds and perfume. So, they set up a trap and placed bright orange and yellow marigolds in it. Then they sprayed the trap with a flowery scented perfume. Then they waited... and waited.

Within a few hours, all of the ladybugs were in the trap. There were hundreds of ladybugs! Now that the ladybugs were all gone, the next step was to introduce the red and black-dotted flamingo to the brine shrimp and hope that it would start to eat it.

Several weeks later, I returned to the zoo. I was excited to check out the flamingo to see if the red and black spots disappeared. Sure enough... the flamingo was pink just like all the rest of the flamingos. It was also with the others in the pond. In the end, the flamingo was happy, and the others liked it.

Raewyn Schmeidler

Roosevelt Elementary School

2nd Grade, 1st Place (tie)

The Dancing Dog

My dog likes to dance in the air sometimes and she likes to dance on the ground, it is funny when she dances. Her name is Cally and she is a Patterdale Terrier. She is brown and is skinny and short. It is cute when she is sleeping, then she wakes me up then she goes on her walk that she loves. She hops like a bunny when she walks, and she also plays with other animals including my cat, Penny. She likes playing with her sister Weasel. Sometimes Cally can be dumb and mean to her sister, but she is not the same as Cally, because Weasel is a different dog all on her own. My dad comes home everyday and Cally dances because she is happy that my dad is home. She also dances with rabbits and likes to chase them, it is cute. She looks happy and Cally's day is complete when she is snuggling with my cat, Penny!

Reagan Deutscher

St. Mary's Grade School

2nd Grade, 2nd Place (tie)

Lily's New Family

It was time for Lily to meet her new family. She was nervous, here it is, here's the house, I think I'm ready! Lily rang the doorbell and a girl answered it. "Hi, I'm Kristina" she said. "I'm Lily" I said back. Then Mom walked into the room. "Hello, Lily" she said. "I'll show you to your room. I heard that you like unicorns, I put a lot of unicorn stuff in your new room." Lily loved unicorns, she was so excited! Then she met her other sister, her name was Tina. Tina thought Lily was cute, but Tina was jealous of Lily because she was cute, Tina thought she herself wasn't cute. Tina didn't tell anyone that she was jealous of Lily. Their Mom had a surprise for the girls, she told them to get their swimsuits on and meet her in the backyard. They got their swimsuits on and went outside, and there was a huge pool and the girls jumped in. Tina knew she had to tell Lily she was jealous. Tina told Lily she was jealous and Lily forgave her and ever since then Lily and Tina got along perfectly.

Avri Kroeger

St. Mary's Grade School

2nd Grade, 2nd Place (tie)

The Dancing Cat

Once upon a time there were three cats that liked to dance. Their owner's name is May. May likes to dance. She is a professional dancer. Today she came home with crutches because she sprained her ankle when she was dancing. She was sad. So, she asked if she could dance. The doctor said no! She was sad so the cats had an idea. They would learn how to dance so they could cheer her up. They practiced all day and night. They learned to spin and then they learned to do the macarena. Then they went back to May, who was watching TV. Then the cats turned off the TV and started to dance. May was not sad; she was happy to see them dancing!

Emersyn Gaschler

St. Mary's Grade School

2nd Grade, 3rd Place

A True Book Connection

It was library for Shyanne's class at Midnight Elementary. Shyanne had been reading a book called, "The Final Snowflake." She had it for a week now and loved it. Shyanne had not finished reading it and wanted to recheck it. She had laid the book down beside her on the floor and listened to the librarian read a story. When the librarian finished reading, it was time to check out books. Shyanne went to grab her book, but it was not beside her. What had happened to it? Shyanne scanned the area around her...no book. She began to cry and shouted, "Where is it?"

"Are you okay, Shyanne?" asked her best friend Patrick.

"I can't find my favorite snowflake book!" Shyanne exclaimed.

"Hey, it's okay," Patrick said calming her down. "Let's look for it together." They looked in the fiction section, in the winter section, and all over the library. Then they looked in the hallway and in their classroom. They couldn't find it! They decided to ask the librarian for help.

"Mrs. Hille!" they called.

"Yes, my dears?" she answered.

"We can't find 'The Final Snowflake' book!" they exclaimed.

"Have you dears tried looking for it?" Mrs. Hille asked.

"Yes!" they both said together. "Could you look on your computer?"

"Sure!" She turned around to look at her computer. She typed in: "The Final Snowflake."

Searching...searching... A map of the library appeared on her screen with a red dot. The red dot was by the summer section. Why would it be there? It was a winter book! Then, the red dot moved, so they peered over to the summer section on the screen. Suddenly, the book moved behind the shelf. They all continued to peer at the screen with big eyes as the red dot continued to move and then stopped. They wondered what happened.

The three of them approached the summer section. They looked down and noticed something really strange. The book was ALIVE! They all, including the book, froze in shock. Here right in front of them, stood a small book with real arms and legs. After a minute, Shyanne held out a shaky hand hesitantly towards the book. The book reached out its hand and touched her hand. Then the book slowly moved toward Shyanne and let her pick it up. The book and Shyanne gazed at each other. Shyanne softly asked the book, "Do you want to come home with me?"

In a very quiet voice, the book responded, "Yes." Shyanne turned to the librarian and asked her if this would be ok. The librarian was still in shock but agreed to let the book go home with Shyanne. She had never in all her years seen this happen.

It was time to go back to class, so Shyanne told the book that she was going to put it in her book bag until it was time to go home. The rest of the day went by slowly. Shyanne couldn't wait to get home. Finally, it was time to leave. When they got home, Shyanne told her parents about the book. They were astonished! They had heard about really making a connection with a book, but this was taking it to another level.

Leah Hillebrand

Roosevelt Elementary

3rd grade, 1st place

A Day to Remember

Chapter 1

One summer day my older brother, baby brother, dad, mom, and myself were at church because my mom and dad worked there. My brothers and I were in the nursery playing on our electronics. It was a pretty moist, muggy, hot day. I had a gut feeling that something was going to happen to us.

Chapter 2

My mom and dad came in to tell us we were going home. Suddenly an alarm went off on both my mom and dad's phones. I thought it was just an alarm to go do something. They looked at their phones and at the same time their eyes popped out. Simultaneously, they said, "We need to stay here" but we could continue playing. I asked them what the alarm was about. They had just left the doorway when I asked this. But I knew they could still hear what I said and just didn't answer me. I figured it must be nothing serious and went back to playing.

About 30 minutes later, they came back and told us it was time to go home. I asked them, "Why couldn't we leave 30 minutes ago?" They answered that they had work to do. But really...I knew they didn't.

Chapter 3

We headed out the door of the church. When we got outside, the clouds looked stormy and dirty because the wind had created dust in the air. It was getting really windy because I was getting pelted with particles from the air. We loaded into the car and headed home. We were almost at I-70 when the wind picked up even more. The car started to rock. I noticed the clouds had a blue-green tint. I felt confused about what was going on. My parents were acting anxiously, but my baby brother was oblivious.

Chapter 4

The road we live on is called Limestone Road and it is made of small bits of limestone sand. When we were on this road, the wind was blowing so hard we couldn't see the path of the road. We had to pull over! After about 15 minutes, the wind died down enough so we could see better.

Chapter 5

When we got home, we ran straight inside. Most everyone in my family was still feeling anxious except my baby brother who was clueless, of course. My brother and I were confused. My mom and dad then told my brother and I to get the dogs and put them inside the garage. When we went outside, we saw a ton of funnel clouds. At that moment, I didn't realize how dangerous they might be. But then I saw one touch down. I knew it was a tornado. I started to panic! So did my older brother. We grabbed the dogs, and a baseball size rock almost hit me on the head! But surprisingly I dodged it. Then another rock, a little smaller than a baseball, hit my stomach.

Chapter 6

My mom hollered for my older brother and I to come inside. But at that moment the wind was knocked out of me, and I was on the ground. I managed to get up and staggered inside. We left the dogs. My mom asked if I was okay. I told her yes, that I just had the wind knocked out of me. We quickly hustled downstairs and stayed there all night.

Chapter 7

In the morning, we woke up and went upstairs to see what had happened. Looking outside, we saw our dogs running around. That gave us relief. Our shed that had all of our scooters in it was blown over. One of our trees had fallen and some of our shingles were blown off. Over the next few months, we had to get these things fixed. My dad had to hook up his ATV with chains to try to pull the shed back up. He couldn't do it, so he had to push the shed with his hands while my older brother operated the ATV and slowly backed up pushing the brake. When we finally got the shed upright, we noticed my frisbee golf goal was crushed by the shed. There was no way to fix it. Even my dad couldn't fix it because it was bent way too much. Then the tree that got knocked over, well my dad had to cut it down. My dad also fixed the shingles with new ones.

That was definitely a day to remember!

Ryken Mayfield
Wilson Elementary
3rd grade, 2nd place

The Food Kingdom Island

There once was a sunny, beautiful sea that had a mysterious island in it. On the island, there were no people or animals, only abundant food. One day a knight and his dragon were out flying over the sea, when they found this island and landed to check it out. They saw all the food and started eating.

The first thing they ate was seafood and suddenly, they turned into puddles of water. After 10 minutes, they turned back to themselves. Then the knight said, "That was weird!" The dragon was shaking all the water off his body.

Later, they ate more food and this time they ate baked potatoes. Shortly afterwards each of them had electricity surrounding their bodies. After 30 minutes the effect wore off. Next, they ate hamburgers and this turned them invisible which lasted 15 minutes.

The knight felt like they were in a dream. But it wasn't. He finally realized that each time they ate different foods, it gave them different superpowers. So, he began to make a plan.

The knight and his dragon went around the world stealing gold and riches. They did this by eating hamburgers to be invisible, then eating hot dogs which made them teleport. Once inside the temples and buildings, the knight put the gold in bags and then would eat hot dogs to teleport back. They repeated this over and over.

In the meantime, Gabe and Halo, two fearless warriors, got a call from the mayor of Sadera who was furious because their gold was stolen. Gabe and Halo went to Sadera and asked the mayor who was committing this crime. The mayor showed Gabe and Halo a video from the vault. It showed the gold moving mysteriously in the air and then disappearing. They were puzzled until they watched further. On the video a knight appeared and looked as though he was eating a hamburger and within seconds the knight was invisible. They thought, "What just happened!" Gabe and Halo watched it again in slow motion and were amazed at what they saw. Now, they were curious. Then the mayor showed another video from outside the vault. They saw a dragon pop out of nowhere. It also ate a hamburger and disappeared.

Gabe and Halo decided to set a trap. They got fake gold and put tracking devices on the gold. They put the gold back in the vault and waited for the thieves. A day later the knight and the dragon stole the gold and took it back to the island.

Gabe, Halo, and their pet griffin (lion mixed with an eagle) followed the tracker to the island. They saw the abundance of food and of course, they ate some hamburgers. Within seconds, they were invisible and sneaked around to find the knight and dragon sleeping. Gabe, Halo and their griffin carefully and quietly took chains and chained them up. They gathered up all the gold and returned it to the rightful owners. They put the knight and dragon in a highly protected prison on the island where they could stare at the abundance of food from inside the cage.

The knight sighed. "Well...at least we'll never go hungry in our dreams"

The dragon groaned. "I just wish I had eaten one last hot dog."

Gideon Tillman

Lincoln Elementary

3rd grade, 3rd place

Lily's Adventure

Lily is the daughter of her mom and dad, and she has a brother Jack. Her friends' names are Molly, Jenny, and Jenna. Jenny and Jenna are twins, so they say stuff at the same time. Lily loves going to the beach. Jack is Lily's big brother who is kind of rude to her. Lily has brown eyes, blonde hair and a pink dress. She lives in Florida and wants to go to the beach and relax. The waves sound soothing. The sand is warm and the water is warm. It sounds like a lot of fun.

The next day, Lily's mom said they could go to the beach. So Lily told her friends and they got ready to go to the beach. "Come on, let's go," Lily said. When they got there, Molly jumped in the water. Lily put sunscreen on and jumped in the water. Then the twins jumped in the water and made a big splash. Then they

raced to see who swam the fastest. Molly and the twins got out to go dry off, but Lily stayed in the water. While Molly and the twins were drying, Lily went farther in the water. Molly saw something huge behind Lily and the Lily was gone. The friends didn't know it, but she was eaten by a whale!

When the girls got back, they told Lily's mom and dad that she disappeared. Then Jack said, "I'll go find her"

Mom said, "No."

Jack said, "If I don't come back, come and look for me." Then he got a flashlight and went looking for her. Mom started to cry and so did her dad.

Meanwhile, Lily noticed that she had hot sauce in her purse. The next day, Lily opened the hot sauce bottle and dumped it out. The whale spit her out. Then she swam and yelled, "Help!"

Jack heard her and ran towards the starting point of the ocean and saw Lily. He ran in the water to go help her get back home.

When Lily and Jack got back home, their mom was so grateful that Jack found Lily. Mom hugged them both and said, "Lily, don't go in the deep ocean if you don't know how to swim!"

McKinley Wertenberger

Wilson Elementary

3rd grade, Honorable Mention

Whispers and Walls

On the first day of middle school, Violeta was excited but also nervous. Last year – and all the years before – people had made fun of her hair. She really hoped this year would be different. This year, she wanted friends. But to her, it was obvious that nobody would want to be her friend.

Her mom drove to work, leaving Violeta to walk to the bus stop alone. Violeta hesitated at the bus stop, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. The morning air was cool, but her palms felt clammy. The scent of damp pavement mixed with the distant smell of fresh-cut grass. While she waited, she tried to distract herself by thinking about her outfit. Today, she was wearing a purple shirt with the word FREE written in bold yellow letters. She liked this shirt because purple and yellow were her favorite colors. Her shorts were light blue with red spots on them.

When the bus pulled up, its brakes let out a loud, screeching hiss, making her jump. She hopped on and hoped for the best. But, of course, people laughed at her hair and clothes. The bus driver didn't stop them – he actually chuckled. Her stomach twisted, and tears welled up in her eyes. She hurried to an empty seat and slumped down, wishing she could disappear.

Violeta hesitated before looking up. Three kids stood in the aisle, not sneering, not laughing – just looking at her like they cared.

"Hi, I'm Sue," one of them said, sliding into the seat across from her. "What's your name?"

"Violeta," she whispered.

"Are you okay?" another one asked. "I'm Sam."

Violeta nodded quickly. "I'm okay."

"No, you're not," the third one said softly. "I'm Hattie."

"Go away," Violeta mumbled, embarrassed.

"Come on," Sam said. "Bullies make fun of us all the time, right guys?"

Sue and Hattie both nodded.

"Why do they make fun of you?" Violeta asked, confused.

Sue lowered her voice. "Because I had a bad rash in second grade. Since then, people have called me 'Rash Girl'."

"In preschool, I had to stay home sometimes to help my mom with my baby sister, Joelle," Hattie added. "Ever since then, people have called me 'Baby Girl.'"

Sam sighed. "And me? People call me a girl because of my long hair."

Violeta hesitated before speaking. “Oh,” she said finally. “I get bullied for my long hair and my clothes.”

The four of them got off the bus and walked the rest of the way to school together.

“Come on,” Sam said. “People are waiting for us.”

“Will you introduce me?” Violeta asked shyly. “I’m not good at meeting new people.”

“Of course. I’m introducing Hattie, too.” Sue reassured her.

“Hurry up!” Terry, Brynly, and Hannah are waiting,” Sam urged.

When they arrived at school, Terry, Hannah, and Brynly were standing by the entrance.

“Mrs. Wong is waiting,” a voice called. It was Mrs. Wong herself. “Now, hurry up and get in here.”

“Yes, Mrs. Wong,” the sixth graders chorused.

She chuckled. “Well, what are you waiting for? Yourselves?”

Laughter rippled through the group. But just then, a group of eighth graders walked by.

“Oh. It’s you.”

The way they said it nearly brought Violeta to tears.

“Well, happy first day of school,” the eighth graders added mockingly before walking away.

Violeta clenched her fists and stared at the ground. *Is this a joke?*

They stepped into the school building. It was tall and wide, with towering hallways that made her feel even smaller.

“What’s with the red walls?” Violeta asked Mrs. Wong, confused.

“These aren’t just any walls,” Mrs. Wong explained. “This is the **Victory Wall**. When we built this school five years ago, we wanted students to remember their successes. So, we gave them red pens and had them write their victories here. One day, your victories will be up there too.”

Violeta wasn’t so sure. She swallowed hard and whispered, “It’s so big...”

After the school tour, the bullying started again.

“Look, its Baby Girl.”

“Long hair and a baby outfit? You guys are weirdos.”

Violeta’s stomach tightened as laughter echoed around them.

A boy with a smirk stepped forward. “Our names are Jack, Jerry, and Bryn,” he said.

“JJB?” Sam scoffed. “How original.”

Another girl walked up beside them – tall, with shoulder-length hair. “I’m Atlantia, and this is Shelby,” she said, folding her arms. “And you guys? You’re losers.”

Violeta felt her eyes sting. *Why does it always have to be this way?*

Taking a deep breath, she turned to her new friends. “Who wants to be friends?” she asked, trying to block out the whispers and stares.

Everyone in the group nodded.

Jack, Jerry, and Bryn exchanged glances. Then, surprisingly, Atlantia sighed. “Look...people made fun of us too,” she admitted. “We thought you’d be like everyone else.”

Violeta hesitated. “So...you bullied us first?”

Atlantia shrugged, looking awkward. “Yeah, I guess. We didn’t want to be the ones getting laughed at again.”

Silence stretched between them. Then, Sam stepped forward.

“Well, if you don’t want to be bullied...maybe you shouldn’t be bullies either,” he said firmly.

“Atlantia and the others exchanged another glance. Then, slowly, they nodded.

From that day forward, Violeta, Sue, Sam, and Hattie weren’t alone anymore. They faced middle school together, growing stronger every day.

But one day in high school...

Kersee Wince

Lincoln Elementary

4th Grade, 1st place

The Phantom Prank

Once upon a time, there were three children – two twin sisters and their little brother. The girls, Lily and Lila, were ten years old, and their younger brother, Jackson, was almost two. The family had just moved into a new house, and while they were excited, they couldn't shake their nervousness.

"How will I make new friends?!" Lila cried, flopping onto her bed.

"And there are rumors that this house is haunted!" Lily yelled, hugging her pillow tightly.

"Bwah, bwah, bwah!" Jackson wailed, tears forming in his eyes.

Their mother walked into the room and gently scooped Jackson into her arms. She gave the girls a reassuring smile, but deep down, she had heard the ghost rumors too – and she wasn't entirely sure what to believe.

The next morning, the first day of school arrived. Lily and Lila were both jittery, unsure of what to expect from their new classmates. Jackson, Meanwhile, was terrified of daycare, unsure how the other kids and teachers would treat him.

As they sat together in their room, finishing breakfast, a strange noise echoed through the house.

"Oooooooooo, ooooooooooooo, ooooo... BOO!!!"

Lila gasped. "I knew it! This house is haunted! Right, Jackson? Jackson?!"

She looked around in panic. Her little brother was gone.

"He went to the bathroom just before the noise started," Lily whispered, her voice trembling.

Then, just as they were about to go looking for him, the eerie sound returned.

"Boo!"

This time, a shadowy figure emerged from behind the bedroom door.

"G-g-ghoooooost!!!" Lily and Lila screamed, clinging to each other in terror.

The figure was completely covered in a flowing white sheet.

"It's pure white!" Lila cried.

"With no eyes!" added Lily, her hands shaking.

Then, Lily narrowed her eyes. "Wait... it's moving like it has feet."

"As if it actually *does* have feet!" Lila gasped.

The twins exchanged a glance. Something wasn't adding up. Ghosts didn't wear bedsheets in real life – only in cartoons!

"Let's pull off the sheet and see if it's really a ghost," Lily whispered.

Lila nodded. "On three. One... two... THREE!"

Together, they yanked the sheet away – only to reveal **Jackson** underneath, giggling uncontrollably.

"JACKSON!" Lily shouted, hands on her hips.

"You scared us half to death!" Lila added, crossing her arms.

Jackson, still grinning, plopped onto the floor, unfazed by their anger. "Boo!" he said again, clapping his little hands.

"Oh, I'm telling Mom right now!" Lilly huffed, stomping off.

Jackson's eyes widened. "Nooooo!"

"Mum!" Lily called as she ran into the kitchen. "Jackson terrified us by pretending to be a ghost!"

Their mother sighed, shaking her head. "Oh, Jackson," she said scooping him up. Then, with a small smile, she added, "Well, I just got off the phone with the realtor. There's *no* ghost in the house – just a very mischievous little boy."

Lily and Lila exhaled in relief.

"Yay!" they cheered, twirling around the room.

From that day on, the twins weren't afraid of their new home anymore. Instead of ghosts, they focused on making friends at school – and keeping a closer eye on their prankster little brother.

And as for Jackson? He still loves playing tricks... but he never tried the ghost prank again.

Or did he?

Kersee Wince

Lincoln Elementary

4th grade, 2nd place

A Swimming Secret

One day, a twelve-year-old girl named Charlotte was at swimming practice with her team. Kendra, her coach, told all the experienced swimmers to go in the deep end. The new ones, meanwhile, were done, so, they went to wait for their parents. But one of them, Clair, was Charlotte's sister, so she had to wait for her to finish.

Kendra brought Charlotte and her group over to the deep end and made them do conditioning. About 10 minutes later, she told them to take a break while she went to the restroom. Charlotte was not tired and did not need a break. She was the oldest out of her group and only one who could touch the bottom of the deep end. Everyone was busy taking breaks, drinking water, but since Charlotte was not tired, she went to touch the deep end. She dove headfirst into the pool in streamline on her way to touch the bottom. She got so close but was running out of air when she saw a spot with green sparkly water. She was so tempted to touch the bottom, but she had to come back up for air. After a tiny break she dove back in, this time she knew she could. She was right at the green water spot, but did not know if she should touch it. But she knew her coach would be back soon, so she did it.

She was in a whole new body of water that she had never seen before! She was IN water, but breathing...? She was so confused and decided to look around; she saw someone she had never seen before.

"Who are you!?" said Charlotte. She got no answer. But the person was holding a tray with a strawberry. The mysterious man was also holding a sign, and it said, "eat the strawberry."

"Why should I listen to you? I don't know you!" said Charlotte. The man pulled out another sign, it read, "When you eat this strawberry, you will magically be so much better at swimming."

I don't know about that, you know what? I must go now! Bye!" Charlotte saw the exit and swam out as fast as she could. She was back in the pool she knew, she also knew her coach was back and would be mad when she saw that she was gone. Once she reached the surface, there was her coach, and she was MAD!

"Where were you?" said Kendra. Charlotte explained all she was doing was touching the bottom and Kendra was not mad but said "it cannot happen again."

Practice was over so she dried off, got changed and went to find Clair. Clair was in the waiting room, so Charlotte told her they had to go.

Charlotte was thinking about what happened, should she have eaten that strawberry, or did she do the right thing and not eat it? She thought she should keep what happened a secret; it's not like anyone would believe her anyway.

She had to swim tomorrow evening again and she thought if she had time, she would go check it out again.

The next day came, it was a Tuesday, so she had school. At school she could not stop thinking what had happened and if she was going to eat the strawberry or, what if it was gone, and she could never go in there again!?

She was sure she would eat it this time. She was so excited to go home: this had felt like the longest day EVER. She was so happy when she heard that bell ring, she went home right away.

"How was school?" asked Charlotte's mom.

"It was great! I am going to get ready for swim now!"

"No, you are not, swim does not start for 3 more hours! AND you must do chores." Charlotte was bummed but she went to do her chores. Usually, chores took about an hour so that would take some time.

"That took forever!" Charlotte said.

"Yes, it did, because now it's time for dinner." For dinner, her mom made lasagna. Once Charlotte was done eating, she got ready for swim. Since Clair was only 5, Charlotte had to help her get ready. She got dressed and packed her own bag. Then, she dressed Clair and then helped her pack her bag. They got in the car and headed to the pool. Once they got to the pool, Charlotte was extremely excited to hear that they were starting in the deep end. Then, it got even better! Right when they got over there, Kendra had to go to the bathroom! Charlotte thought she was the luckiest person ever! Right away, she went to the bottom and into the weird portal thingy. This time she had no hesitation to eat the strawberry.

"CHARLOTTE!" Her coach yelled; she swam up as fast as she could. Kendra was VERY mad, and she asked what she was doing. Charlotte knew there was no point in lying so she told the truth. Kendra told her she could NEVER go back down there again or else she would be kicked off the swim team! Charlotte was not

too sad since she had already eaten the strawberry, but what did it do? They went back to the shallow part of the pool.

Charlotte went underwater to get in the streamline, but she was swimming automatically and fast. She was going faster than people that were usually faster than her! She now knew what that strawberry did and was the fastest kid on the team!

Cambree Schmidt

O'Loughlin Elementary

4th grade, 3rd place

Untitled

It was my very first time doing a solo, and I was freaking out because I had just forgotten it! It was a chilly winter night but inside, especially under the stage lights, it was nice and warm. I was standing by Jamie who I was sure hated me. Jamie is one year younger than I am, but she has been in dance longer than me. She is better than me at math and was always teasing me that I can't do math problems. Our parents are best friends, so we have to get along, being ten and Jamie being nine. I am in charge of her when we are playing, so if she gets hurt, I get the blame. Now glittering in the dim light of the stage, she saw me freaking out like crazy.

As I frantically tried to remember my solo, the song before mine was already halfway done! My sister, Alice, ran into a problem like this one time when she was acting and couldn't remember her lines. I could not remember what she did. I heard a voice saying my name, but I could barely hear it over my own thoughts. Then I had an idea. My baby sister's favorite toy when you press a button says something about improvising when you forget something, but I did not know what improvising means. Then someone whispered in my ear "Maxie!"

"Maxie, are you okay, what is wrong!" whispered Jamie.

"No, I am not fine. I just forgot my solo!" I replied. My heart pounded and my chest felt like I just ran a race at my top speed.

"That has happened to me before. Just improvise, make it up as you go along!" she laughed.

"Ok," I said then as the song before mine ended.

Jamie said "Good luck"

"You, too" I replied as I ran onto stage, my heart pounding in my chest, but this time it was from excitement!

When all the lights were off, I was thinking how kind Jamie was to me. Jamie is not the nicest person I know, but she still helped me. When my dance instructor announced, "Here is Maxie Green's solo. She is dancing to 'Mama Mia' by ABBA." I thought my heart would pound right out of my chest. Then FLASH – the lights turned on.

I blinked in the bright stage lights. I looked down at the shine the sequins made on the floor. They were shining, glittery, purple lights. Somehow, it calmed me down, but then my song started, and I became frozen on stage. I remembered what Jamie had said to just make it up. She said to just make it up, I whispered to myself. Then I remembered what my dance instructor had told me that if you forget, just improvise. Improvise, Improvise, I whispered.

I began dancing freely. Shana's turn here, a cartwheel there. I was not even thinking about what I was doing. My whole dance felt like it went as fast as lightening as if my feet had a mind of their own. Even when my glasses fell off, somehow, I turned and picked them up in an impressive floor show and did almost a perfect aerial.

Then I remembered the last little bit of my solo. Ponie, ponie, gallop, ball change, gallop ball change, cartwheel, and posted... it was exhilarating! I wanted to jump up and down. I could not stop smiling. I smiled so long my face hurt. There was no way this night could get any better, but then it did.

The crowd went wild. The clapping and cheering was as loud as anything I had ever heard before. It felt like it would go on forever! When the applause finally stopped, and the lights turned off, it became silent. I walked backstage and went to the dressing room where all of my friends had been watching it all on a small

TV. They cheered like I was a celebrity that had just won a contest. “That was amazing. The ending was perfect!” Clara Reed said.

“I guess you took my advice after all,” Jamie said.

After we finished our bowling and I was leaving, Jamie came up to me and said, “My parents are taking a picture of me. Would you like to be in the photo?”

“I would love to,” I replied. After the picture, Jamie and I walked out together.

Jamie said to me, “I could use a first real friend if you would like to be mine.”

I replied, “I would love to.” Then we arrived at our cars. As I climbed in, I remembered the night and how I had made a new friend.

Evelyn Bryant

O’Loughlin Elementary

4th grade, Honorable Mention

The Great Gorillas

November 3, 2024

I walk on a flat, endless, concrete walking path. As I gaze at my side, I see bunnies eating the fresh green grass. Then, I see a great sign on a huge building. As I look, only two metal chains attach to the sign.

As I walk in, I notice signs on the bumpy, white walls. Two windows open to the outside and let sunshine in throughout the afternoon. There are two cages: one with cute and fluffy lemurs and one with boring gorillas. The gorillas are like rocks that won’t budge. Finally, I sit down, and I wait for my family to be done watching. I sit there while time goes by like sand in an hourglass.

“Coco, May, Sparkle!” a lady calls.

Then another lady calls in a low voice, “Cali and Mike!”

They go in a hole we can’t see, yet I wonder what is happening. Do they need a break? Why did they all go in there? These questions filled my head like fish swimming in the ocean. Each fish is a question, and they are all different. Suddenly, they walk out of the hole, and the humans come out with a striped bowl.

“What’s in the bowl?” my sister questions.

I think yummy fruit,” my dad says, questioning himself.

“There is, there is!” I say with excitement.

There are juicy, vivid red strawberries with their tops off, and there is pastel yellow pineapple. The fruit is dripping from their hands like when you are soaked by rain. Next, they play around like me on Christmas morning. Then, they all go outside and gaze at each other in the blazing sunshine.

My family and I follow the gorillas and dash outside. Everyone is watching the gorillas play around and dance. Watching the gorillas is like watching the solar eclipse happen... exciting, amazing, and totally unexpected. I feel happy and refilled for the rest of the day, and I realize that I shouldn’t be so quick to judge something as boring!

Afton Augustine

Wilson Elementary

4th grade, Honorable Mention

Untitled

“Start your engines!” yelled the announcer. Grandpa rushed out onto the track to start up the engine, as Jack put on his helmet and seatbelt. Jack was racing at the “Grand 15 lap finals” because he wanted to win \$1,000. Next, the announcer called out, “30 seconds!” Finally, the announcer said, “10 seconds!” At the 3 second mark, everyone stepped on the gas pedal, and they were off! All but one driver.

Jack's go-kart would not move. Jack sat there frustrated. He forgot that his go-kart was not waterproof. Jack had to tow his go-kart to the shop to waterproof it. What the shop had done to waterproof it was they bolted a bucket over the turbo because the turbo cannot suck in water, or it would stop the engine. When Jack got back out on the track, the others only had 1½ laps done. That would not be a problem for Jack because he was the only one who had a turbo.

Once Jack got back out on the track, he sped up to about 50 mph. While the others were only going about 35 mph, Jack eventually got caught up. Jack passed the first few drivers with ease. The next few drivers were a bit harder, but Jack still managed to pass them. Now he was in the top three and only had 3 laps to go. Jack was finally head-to-head with the second-place driver. He SLAMMED on the gas pedal and was traveling about 55 mph. Jack was now pushing the go-kart's limits.

After Jack passed the second-place driver, he was right beside the first-place driver. Jack was now on the final stretch and could see the checkered flag. He was pushing the gas pedal as hard as he could when he remembered that he had a turbo. Jack turned on his turbo and sped past the finish line.

Jack won! As grandpa jogged out onto the track, Jack's sister, Judy, was at the concession stands buying a bag of popcorn. Judy did not know that Jack had already been racing because she had to wait in a very long line. Judy was headed to the bleachers when Jack drove by and told her that the race was over and that he had won.

Grandpa was right behind Jack in his golf cart and asked Jack and Judy, "Do you want to go get ice cream?"

Judy yelled, "Yay, ice cream!"

"But first we need to get my \$1,000," said Jack.

"We know!" shouted Judy as she jumped into Jack's go-kart.

"Full speed ahead!" yelled grandpa. Jack drove towards the prize booth to get his \$1,000.

Judy told Jack, "This go-kart is super fast!"

Once Jack claimed his \$1,000, he shouted, "I am rich!"

Grandpa said, "It is only \$1,000."

"Now, can we get some ICE CREAM!?" yelled Judy.

"Not with that attitude," said grandpa.

"OK, but can we please get ice cream now?" asked Judy.

"Yes, we can get ice cream now," said grandpa.

Bryce Irwin

O'Loughlin Elementary

4th grade, Honorable Mention

That Ride

Sharon Springs, 2023

I'm driving down a tannish dirt road on my way to my cousin's big house. We are on their street.

Suddenly, my mom says, "Is that Mackenzi and Jordan walking by the house?"

I shriek, "YES."

Then she drops me off and goes to park. We all walk around the block and then we come back to the house, and I get to see my other cousin, Everleigh! They show me around, and their house is huge... as big as a castle. Next, we go into Mackenzi's room and talk about the fair.

Then my grandma comes in and says, "What do you want to eat?"

I say, "A cheeseburger." It tastes so good, I want to eat 500 more.

Later that night, I'm in Mackenzi's room watching music videos. I make them laugh by saying that the singer looks like he just got dumped. Suddenly, Mackenzi yanks Everleigh's face and starts to die laughing. "I think I peed the bed!" Mackenzi whimpers.

The next day, it is the day of the fair. My cousins and I are going to the miniature swimming pool. I put on my swimsuit. It is neon green. Mackenzi and Everleigh's swimsuits are black at the top and cheetah print at

the bottom. We finally arrive, and the pool actually looks medium size! My cousins and I are going down a pee-wee twisty slide and eating our candy. Mine is a scrumptious Kit Kat. Mackenzi loves mango rings, so she gets that. Jordan gets barbecue chips and shares with Everleigh.

The rest of the day until the fair we play board games.

About three hours later, we are at the Sharon Springs Fair! We go on so many rides, and up to that point my favorite is the roller coaster. The roller coaster is small but wavy, so you go up and down and up and down.

There are so many other rides like the Twirl-A-Whirl. That one is where you are in a purple semicircle, and you spin around and around.

My cousins try and get me to go on one of the scariest rides at the fair. They tell me that it spins at sonic speed, and it weaves through itself. That just makes me more frightened.

So, I try and avoid it and say, "How about we go to the Jewelry Spin?"

They agree.

The Jewelry Spin has this huge, eye-catching rainbow wheel, and whatever number you land on is the bin you get to pick from.

Eventually, I use up all my excuses, and we end up in line for the Scrambler. I am super anxious. My cousins keep telling me about it, and it just makes me more nervous.

Now we are getting on the Scrambler. I ask my cousins if I can sit in the middle, and they let me. I can hear it start to spin like I'm going down a steep roller coaster. At first, I am super freaked out, and I practically jump out of my skin. But then, it starts to go very fast. At first it is very frightening, and then after like a minute, I start to enjoy it. We weave in and out and it becomes my favorite ride at the fair. My cousins try and get me to try new rides, but they can't stop me from using up all my tickets on that ride. I think that ride is the most gut-busting ride I have ever been on!

We end the night with a tiny train ride and some cotton candy while watching the sun go down. I learn that trying new things will not always end badly.

Josslyn Dreiling

Wilson Elementary

4th grade, Honorable Mention

Squirks

(to be read in a David Attenborough voice)

Welcome to this podcast about squirks. I'm your host Neo Thinkmouth.

When a squirk is born it is called a bean. Beans live in pods. (Mentioned in body paragraph 4.) Beans eat small plums called plops. Plops grow on trees that are hidden from the sun, as the fruits are delicate. Beans are allergic to pickles due to their chemicals and fumes. At three months, they'll grow a little tail. The tail is truly short. As squirks get older, their tails grow more hair, making it look like the tail is longer than it really is.

When squirks grow one and a half years old, no longer in their bean stage, they will leave their tree and learn to glide using their tail fur. While beans are mainly full of happiness for the time of being a bean, they have one enemy. Hedhogs. Hedhogs and beans have a lot of bad blood. Nobody knows why. The beans throw plot pits at them, and hedhogs shoot quills back, and that's how the world works.

Sometimes, a squirk will find an elder plot tree. An elder plot tree is a plot tree that has 50 or more plots. (A plop tree grows another plot each day.) They will make a roaring/squeaking sound called "The Awakening." All of the squirks (and beans, being carried by their parents) in the area will immediately come to feast. About 11 awakenings happen each season in Camentesuia in South America.

As soon as they're out in the wild of the jungle, the males start looking for females. A female squirk has light pink skin. It's easy for squirks to notice, but humans find it difficult to spot. But if two males want one female, the two male squirks sort it out in a tail wrestling competition, using complicated tail muscles to control their tail fur. It's a lot like thumb wrestling. As soon as a male squirk finds a female squirk, they will

dig a pod, a little hidey hole in a tree where they can have 5-9 beans. Plop trees are good for making pods and sometimes have natural pods.

They will spend the rest of their life as a family, eating plops and herbs until ages 14-16. They will not die at this age but rather head to the tallest tree in the area, climb it, and wiggle-fly up to the heavens.

So that's it, folks. Tune in next time where we discuss phrogs, and their fascinating, adorable, lifestyle. Thank you for listening to my podcast hosted by Gloink Radios.

Nigel Williams

Wilson Elementary

5th grade, 1st place

The Roller Coaster

Pop! The balloon deflated instantly as a dart nailed it dead center.

"Great job, kid. Here's your prize," the stall owner yelled, screaming to be heard over the ear-splitting music of the amusement park.

"Nice job, Mable!" Wendy congratulated, slapping her on the back playfully.

"Thanks!" Mable beamed.

"Did ya see *that*, Waddles?" Mable asked, turning around to face her pet pig. The scene was so unique it wasn't hard to pick out among the thousands of people at the carnival. Mabel's brother, Dipper, had Waddles on top of him, trying to eat his hat.

"Hey!" Stop it!" Dipper exclaimed, struggling to get Waddles off him. Mable giggled lightheartedly.

"That hat cost me a whole twelve dollars to manufacture! Spit it out right this instant!" Stanley bellowed. Her Great Uncle Stanley had paid for getting into the carnival, and everything else for that matter. Dipper, taking his hat back from Waddles and setting him down, shook his head slowly.

"*Ugh*," he moaned. "My hat's got pig slobber all over it! I'm going to go wash this off," he stated, disappearing into the crowd.

"If you don't mind, I'm gonna get some cotton candy," Wendy declared, not waiting for an answer. Stan groaned, knowing he had to pay for that too. He handed Mable a crumpled five-dollar bill.

"Go knock yourself out, kid," he advised, slinking after Wendy.

"Looks like we're on our own, Waddles," Mable remarked. She bent down, picked Waddles up, and started to look around to see what she wanted to ride. Mable gasped. Before her stood the tallest roller coaster in Oregon.

"*That's* what we're gonna ride on Waddles," Mable declared, determination etched into her voice. Her new goal was to get to the line. She dodged person after person, slowly getting closer to her destination. Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, she made it to the line. It looked like two miles long, and it would take forever to get to the front.

"We're just going to have to wait it out," she whispered reluctantly. One hour passed, and (finally!) it was her turn. As the last people got out of their seats, Mable stepped forward. She would at last get to ride.

"Wait," the operator commanded sternly. With a sinking feeling she let him go on.

"Animals are not allowed on the rides," he explained, pointing to a NO ANIMALS sign she hadn't noticed before.

"It's a safety precaution," he said, sympathy in his eyes.

"Waddles isn't an animal; he's my best friend!" Mable pleaded, desperate to say anything that might change the man's mind.

"Sorry, manager's orders," he said, shaking his head. "But I can hold him for you while you ride."

"Okay," she agreed reluctantly, handing him a five-dollar and Waddles to hold. Mable sat down in the lead coaster, and other people filled in behind her. The operator pushed a small red button, and the cars started to move. It started slowly, and was almost boring as the coaster climbed the first bump. As it reached the top,

her excitement mounted. Then it happened. The cars were now as fast as a subway train, hurtling down the track. People started to scream, but Mable barely noticed.

They raced over the loop the loops, twists, turns, and everything in between. Mable felt her hair being lifted in the wind and the air whipping her face. It was the first time she had experienced pure acceleration, and it was wonderful. She even managed to forget that Waddles wasn't riding with her. All too soon, the ride ended.

The operator handed her Waddles, who was squeaking with delight at seeing her face. Mable picked Waddles up and gave him a gentle pat on the head.

"Thank you," she said, expressing her gratitude to him.

"You're quite welcome, miss" he replied, dipping his hat. Mable gave a small smile and turned round to walk toward the direction of her friends.

Laeci Rome

O'Loughlin Elementary

5th grade, 2nd place

The A.I. Teacher

It's the year 4072AD and it's just another day of school. My teacher is a robot and, as you can imagine, things don't go so well because they are programmed to be like teachers from the early 1900's. I trudge out of bed at 4:30 in the morning and teleport 777 floors down to get breakfast from the cafeteria served by our family's robot chef. Then another 98 floors to start hover crafting to school. The reason that our teacher is a robot is because human teachers got banned in 3056 for giving false information to students.

As I go 682 miles per hour towards school in my hover craft, I'm thinking of my teacher's robot voice, and I laugh because it sounds like a peacock from a 2024 video clip. I slow down and go through the laser security and take my seat right next to the teacher's desk. As the teacher rolls in and slaps her ruler on the TV which gets everyone's attention in milliseconds.

"Today we will learn absolutely nothing, and I will torture you" our teacher said.

"Noooooooooooo!" we all yelled!

"I'm just joking" exclaimed the teacher. After that we had some games such as 4 Corners and Sparkle, but I cheated so I got a couple of ruler spankings. I realized that the spankings really weren't that hard although I was still slightly mad about her spanking me.

After school, I went back home. But first, stopped at the fuel store to grab a chocolate bar for 1,000,000,001 dollars, while it was on sale. *What a deal, inflation is going down!* I think as I am going to the cash register and using my parent's bitcoin account. As I hover home to my 8,376-story miniature house.

I step in and find my teacher talking to my parents! I freak out and quickly teleport to my 8-story bedroom. I eat a bowl of delicious, boiled cabbage in my room to relax my toes. As I sit on my bed, I hype myself up to talk to my teacher. I go back down and go forward to my living room. I prepare myself to talk to my teacher but, all I can squeak out is a "Hi." Then I get a light ruler spanking for not being formal and polite.

I just go to bed and watch a movie in my head.

The next morning, I hover to school, hoping to find a plan to put an end to her. My plan is to dump oobleck into her charging plug so that she will disintegrate into nothingness.

I have a mischievous smile on my face after I make the beautiful concoction. I sprint into action and hide behind the door waiting for my teacher. I feel like a lion stalking his prey ready to pounce. I hear her wheels coming down the hallway. As she enters the classroom, I spring into action and dump all of the oobleck into her charging plug. After that, I immediately feel a hard whack right on my back. I yelp in pain; I hear my teacher squeal as she is disintegrating. I turn around to see my teacher in dust on the ground! The classroom is silent, but it feels like it was screaming at me. Finally, a singular clap happens. That was it. I was the hero, I think at least.

The next day, we just got another robot teacher, and it was the same old thing. I just tried to like the robots but, in the end, that was too hard. Sometimes things just can't go the way you want them to. I feel bad

that I basically killed my teacher. Now with her gone I am actually kind of missing her. I know that this surprises you but she was funny sometimes and resisted giving us a butt slap. I think that because she was programmed to be a mean teacher and was required to be one, and I didn't think of her as actually being nice. Now thinking back, she really was nice and kind of cool. Tonight, I am going to hope for my old teacher and her personality to be revealed. I know that this might actually become true because of whatever technology is out there. I really hope for this for all teachers just for them to use their real personality for me and all kids, too. I slowly drift to sleep still hoping for my wish to come true.

When I wake, I bound out of bed and get dressed rapidly. With how fast I run to the teleporting station, it feels like I just woke up on Christmas Day, running, eager to open my presents. I take an abrupt stop and realize that I have never been excited about going to school in the morning. I really want what I wished for to be true.

I teleport to the kitchen and order the usual waffles topped with aspen tree bark sap into the 3D food printer. The 3D food printer's name is Theadore, and he comes out of our chef's hat, like in a really old 2007 movie called Ratatouille. After I finish my breakfast, I hustle down to teleport to the hover craft charging station, and stat fling to school. I put my hover craft in my favorite corner to hide my hover craft, which is right by the potty room.

I sprint as fast as I can possibly go, my legs fly through the air as I fling the school door open. I speed walk as fast as I can because of the rule "no running" in the hallway. I get to my classroom, but I realize that I am 20 minutes early and the teacher comes 1 minute after the gong rings. So, I just sit and wait with intensity running through my whole body, head to toe.

After what feels like an eon, only one minute has passed. I sigh in disappointment and just decide to lay my head down on my desk. I think I may drift off to a light sleep and I dream of my teacher and what will happen if my wish comes true.

BOOM!

I pop in in a millisecond and realize it was my classmate dropping his textbook. I stay awake and as classmates pour into the room, but no teacher yet. After waiting for what feels like hours on hours on hours. I think that I could have walked 18,957 miles and still have 20 hours until the gong will ring. Just at that moment, the gong rung and then the countdown begins.

This is the longest minute of my life. I could do 111,112 laps around the earth if I wanted to, but I don't I sit up straight when I hear wheels turning down the hallway. As my old teacher wheelies into the room, I let out a large squeal of happiness and hug her, then the rest of the class too. Then she started teaching so lively and full of energy. I realized that my dream came true and that was all I wanted. Now school was actually fun! That was a sentence I never thought I would say. I come home and skip all the way to my bedroom and lie down. I slowly drift to sleep thinking of how lucky I am.

Griffin Dietz

O'Loughlin Elementary

5th grade, 3rd place

The Intergalactic Odyssey

Once upon a time, Oliver was sitting in his room. He was reading from a *Time for Kids* magazine. He was reading about a future NASA mission to Mars. *Wow, he thought. That's really awesome! I wish I could be exploring space in a starship!* He suddenly found himself thinking of the risky but amazing missions of *Star Trek*.

"I should build a starship!" He said to himself. "Then I can also explore space!" Suddenly, he heard a loud sound. He turned around and saw his mom standing in the doorway. Her mouth was turned down in an ugly frown. "Now then, *what* in the world is going on in here??"

"I'm gonna build a starship!" Oliver said.

"YOU build a STARSHIP? Ha! Good luck, kid!" she said, slamming the door behind her.

Oliver was determined to finish his project. "Let's start with the materials," he said. After months of hard work, Oliver had acquired these items:

- * 5 tons of steel
- * 10,000 circuit boards
- * 20 computers
- * 5 rocket engines
- * hammers, saws, screwdrivers, nails, and screws

Finally, Oliver was ready to start building. *Clang! Bam! Bzzzz!!* Oliver's backyard got filled with the sounds of hammers and saws. Every so often, Oliver's mom would suddenly open the door and step outside.

"What's all the racket out here!?" she would say.

"I told you already! I'm building a starship!" But Mom would never believe him. *I guess she'll just have to wait and see*, Oliver thought. While building, he ran into lots of issues. But Oliver would not give up. After months of long, tiring hours, Oliver's starship was complete. Just then, Oliver's mom came outside to take out the trash. She saw the gigantic ship and dropped the trash can. She was speechless.

"B-B-but how?" She finally managed to say. Oliver ignored her question. He went inside the house and grabbed some snacks and water for his journey. He climbed into the cockpit and grabbed the throttle. He drove the ship onto the road and pressed the ignition button. *10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, blast off!* The ship zoomed into the air.

"Space, here I come!!" said Oliver. The ship kept going as it gained speed. The sky seemed to never end. Then there was darkness. Oliver peered out of the small round window. He saw stars and planets in every direction he looked. "Yay! I finally made it! Which planet should I visit first?" Oliver saw a small red and blue planet ahead of his ship. "That planet looks like fun! I should go there!" Oliver flew forward until he was very close to the planet. Then he slowed down the spacecraft and made a neat landing on the planet's dusty surface. Oliver stepped out of the door. The ground felt dry and scratchy, almost as if he was standing on grains of sand. The air felt heavy and hot. *What a strange place*, Oliver thought. Suddenly, a weird creature appeared. An alien! It crawled forward until it was only a foot away from Oliver.

"Welcome to my planet!" it said.

"Hi! My name is Oliver!" said Oliver. "Let's have some fun!" So Oliver and the friendly alien played. They met many other aliens along the way. Eventually, the alien told Oliver it needed to go home. "Good-bye!" said Oliver. For the next few days, Oliver explored many other planets. He was having the time of his life. He was heading towards a large orange planet when he noticed a shape in the distance. As it came closer, Oliver saw the shady silhouette of...a starship? It was similar to his, only bigger and more evil looking. The other ship was now only about 30 feet away from Oliver's ship! Inside, Oliver was frantically pushing buttons! Suddenly, his ship completely stopped! Oliver saw a green energy field around it. A tractor beam! The evil ship had caught Oliver! He tried to break free! 100,000 miles per hour. 200,000. 300,000. 400,000. 500,000. Oliver was about to go to 600,000 when he remembered that his ship was only built to reach 500,000. If he went to 600,000, the engines would explode. If he didn't, the evil ship would destroy him. What should he do? What *could* he do? Nothing. Oliver was doomed.

A blinding light flashed in Oliver's eyes. When it was gone, he turned around to see where it came from. Oliver saw a silver object. Light had bounced off it into Oliver's eyes. But what was the sparkly object? It was moving quickly toward Oliver's ship. It was yet *another* starship. Oliver looked into the cockpit of the new ship. He was so surprised he almost fainted. His MOM! His MOM was in the other ship! She shot her blasters at the evil ship. Its tractor beam turned off. Oliver's mom locked Oliver in her own tractor beam. She pulled Oliver toward Earth. Oliver couldn't say a word. They were above America now. Soon, Oliver could see his house! Both ships suddenly made jerky movements. They had landed! The door opened. Oliver's mom stepped out.

"Come out, Oliver!" she said. But Oliver was as still as a statue.

"But...how did you..." Oliver said.

"It will all make sense soon. But now, let's go inside." Oliver's mom made them both cups of hot chocolate. They sat at the dining table and Oliver's mom began to talk. "You see, a long time ago, before you were born, I was a famous starship captain," she explained. "But when you were born, I decided that I would spend my time caring for you. So, I took my starship apart in pieces that were easy to put back together. When

you built your own ship and blasted away, I got really worried. So, I followed you.” Oliver was flabbergasted. His own MOTHER was a starship captain!

“Thanks,” he said. “You saved my life out there!”

“You’re welcome,” she said. “And I’m sorry I was so mean and wouldn’t believe you when you told me about your ship.”

“It’s okay,” said Oliver. “I forgive you.”

One week later, Oliver sits at the table, watching a video about an undersea exploration. *Wow, that looks really cool, he thinks. I wish I could explore the ocean in my own submarine...*

Oliver Buckstead

O’Loughlin Elementary

5th grade, Honorable Mention

Wendigo: Hunter of the Nights

“Nancy, you said we wouldn’t hike that far!” Kathryn exclaimed, while stepping over a rotting, fallen log.

“Oh, come on. It is not much farther now.” Nancy said, way too cheerfully. “If we keep walking, we’ll make it there by sundown!” Nancy and Kathryn were walking towards a camping site that was said to be haunted by Wendigos.

“Nancy, I’m starting to think this is a bad idea... can we turn ba-”

“No! We’ve gotten this far, we can’t turn back now!” Nancy said, determined to get to the camping site. Reluctantly, Kathryn continued walking, stepping over brush and large roots from trees. “Oh, look, Kat! We’re here!” Kathryn looked around the small clearing.

“Wow... I guess it really isn’t that bad.”

“See? I told you! Now help me set up the tent, Kat!” Exclaimed Nancy, who was already unpacking.

Once they finished setting the tent up, they went inside and unrolled their sleeping bags. They had a quick meal of homemade sandwiches which they had packed before coming to the campsite, then snuggled up side by side in their sleeping bags. “Now, tell me, Nancy. Why is this site considered ‘haunted’?” Kathryn questioned, and Nancy hesitated.

“I’m not exactly sure, but a few of my friends told me a little bit...” Kathryn looked at her expectantly, waiting for her to go on. After a long pause, Nancy let out a sigh and began telling the story.

“Long ago, like, a thousand years or so, a hunter was out hunting for food during the winter. As he was walking through this very spot, a terrible blizzard hit. He got trapped in the cold, so he prayed a silent prayer to the gods in hopes he would survive. He gave himself over to them, and in return, he got granted immortality.” Nancy looked at Kathryn, worry creasing her brow.

Kathryn, who had been silent a moment too long, finally responded. “But that doesn’t make any sense. How could this place be haunted if he was granted with the gift of eternal life?”

“Well, because the ‘gods’ he sacrificed himself to weren’t real gods. They were demons that changed him into a monster called a Wendigo. Wendigos are very strong creatures, and can grow about 15 feet tall. When they get close, people say you can smell a horrible stench and feel a sudden chill...”

Suddenly, there was the sound of rustling in a bush nearby their tent. Kathryn jumped to shield herself behind Nancy as a figure emerged from the bush. Its shadow seemed taller than a human. Kathryn screamed, and Nancy grabbed her flashlight and shined it at the shadow. The shadow grew smaller and hopped away, seeming to have been just a small, harmless bunny. Kathryn, still shaking, pulled away from Nancy, who was laughing. “You didn’t think it was a Wendigo, did you?” Nancy said, wiping tears from laughing so hard.

“Oh, stop it. It was sudden, that’s all.” Kathryn stubbornly said, crossing her arms.

“Whatever you say, scaredy-cat. Let’s just get some sleep.”

They got settled and soon, they were fast asleep. They didn’t stir or awaken until early morning, just as the sun was beginning to rise. Kathryn was the first one up, already packing all her things. “What’re you doing up so early?” Nancy said, groggily rubbing her eyes.

“Come on, Nancy. Up and at ‘em! We’re leaving.”

“So soon? Come on, don’t you want to explore more?”

“Uh, yeah, no thanks. I’d rather eat your grandma’s apple pie- which, by the way, is horrible- than stay for another minute in these haunted woods.”

“Supposedly! ‘These *supposedly* haunted woods. There’s no actual proof!’” Nancy said, crossing her arms in a pout, causing Kathryn to roll her eyes.

“Fine. You can stay, but I’m leaving.” With that, Kathryn hitched her backpack onto her shoulders and stepped out of the tent, Nancy scrambling to get up.

“Wait! Kat, wait.” Nancy took a breath. “Fine. I’ll come with you. Just give me a minute to gather my things.”

Ten minutes later, Nancy went over to Kathryn, who turned to look over the now empty campsite.

“You sure you aren’t forgetting anything?”

“I’m sure, Kat. Let’s go.”

They walked for hours, and Kathryn was sure they had gone in a circle at least five times.

“Nancy, are you sure we’re going the right way?” Kathryn said with an eye roll.

“Uh, sure... maybe?” Nancy looked around, then sat down on a nearby fallen tree, her head in her hands. Kathryn suddenly felt bad, and sat down next to Nancy, wrapping her arm around Nancy’s shoulder.

“Hey, N, it’s not a big deal. Sure, we’re a little lost, but we can just use our phones to call someone to come get us, okay?”

“No, Kat... our phones won’t have any signals out here. It’s hopeless. You were right, coming out here was a horrible idea!” Nancy started crying, her head still in her hands.

“No, no. Nancy, it’s not hopeless. We’ll just... retrace our steps, back to the campsite and start again. Okay?”

Kathryn stood up and offered her hand. Reluctantly, Nancy took it. Kathryn led them back to the campsite, carefully retracing their steps.

“Look, Nancy. We’re back at the campsite! Okay, now we just go... this way! Look, it’s the trail we left when we first came!” Kathryn pointed at some fading footprints on the ground, leading into the woods. Kathryn and Nancy, hand in hand, started walking down the path, hoping to return to their car so they could head home. Suddenly, a chill blew through the woods, and Nancy stopped.

“Nancy, come on. You don’t want to spend another night in these woods, do you?” But then Kathryn heard it, too. A low, almost demonic, shrill. It was spine chilling. Kathryn pulled Nancy closer and whispered, “What was that?” Nancy shushed her, as another shrill sounded, causing Kathryn and Nancy to cover their ears.

“I think we over-stayed our welcome! Let’s go!” Kathryn exclaimed, grasping Nancy’s hand and rushing forward, just as another shrill sounded, it seemed to be getting closer.

“Look, the car!” Kathryn pointed, breathing heavily. Suddenly, Nancy’s hand slipped from Kathryn’s, as Nancy fell face first into the ground. Kathryn rushed to pick her up, and once she was on her feet, they kept going.

“Don’t look behind you, Kat!” Nancy said, her voice cracking as she ran. “*She must’ve seen something...*” Kathryn thought to herself. She heard thumping footsteps behind her, and on a hunch, she hesitated with her next step and turned her head to see it- an ash-gray, 15-foot-high figure with massive paw-like talons, horns for ears, and eyes so bright they looked almost as if they were glowing. She felt a tug on her arm, and Nancy’s frantic voice.

“Kat! Kat, come on!” Nancy pulled on her arm once more, breaking Kathryn out of her daze. They rushed out of the woods finally, and jumped into their car, which was awaiting them in a clearing where they had left it. Breathing heavily, Nancy claimed into the driver’s seat and took off immediately. They were silent for a long moment, before bursting into a we-almost-died-but-the-we-didn’t sort of laughter.

“Never again... that was terrifying...” Kathryn said, her voice shaking, just before bursting into tears. She was so relieved. They had survived.

Mila Womack
Hays Middle School
6th Grade, 1st Place

Genesis Allies

Seth

"As you all know, kitsune and dragons have always been enemies, but here, they are not," Headmaster Russel announced.

I looked over at my best friend and roommate, Elijah. I thought the headmaster saying this was overkill. Everyone learns it early in life. We also already knew that kitsune and dragons had the ability to make constructs out of a mist-like magic called Mana.

Elijah smiled softly. For as long as I had known him, he had always been awkward and edgy, but he was smart and sweet, like me. Just I was a lot more assertive, even though I was human while Elijah was part human and part kitsune. That was what made me all the more menacing. I wasn't scared of the power difference. "... I know some of you are human so I feel I must say, Mythics can turn part of or all of their bodies into their other form at will."

Our parents were rivals. They controlled the other two provinces. My parents controlled the dragon province while Elijah's controlled the kitsune province. The province that contained the college we met at was the in the middle. This was a crossroads of territory, so here dragons and kitsune refused to fight - and humans have always mingled freely among both.

"You are dismissed," Mr. Russel's voice boomed through the training hall. *First day presentation, over*, I thought.

Elijah

Seth and I had training together first thing. We'd been in this college since freshman year. During the second semester we ended up moving into the same apartment as roommates. That was how our friendship blossomed. I had a **huge** crush on her. She was always so strong and confident. I could only hope she felt the same.

"Ready, GO!" Seth called out; she was dual wielding her diamond edged katanas while I was gathering Mana in the palm of my hand and at my feet. She lunged at me one katana pressed to her hip and the other in front of her. I threw my hand over my chest and the Mana came up to block the blade. As the metal hit, my black leather jacket fluttered behind me, the chains clinking together as my short black hair blew back. As Seth jumped back, some of her blue dyed hair slipped out of her waist-length ponytail and into her face. We were both looking for an opening, waiting for the other to attack. She pulled her handgun out of its place in a holster under the fluffy gray jacket tied around her waist. We were just sparring so she would be firing blanks.

"Training over!" The training instructor bellowed through the hall after blowing his whistle, stopping our sparring round in its tracks.

Seth

"See ya in calc'," I said to Elijah as we walked out of the training hall.

Combat training was the only class that on the first day wasn't just presentations. We were both majoring in military because we both wanted to fight against the joint enemies of kitsune and dragons. I was hoping that we would be put in the same unit when we graduated. I had a **huge** crush on him, his bronze eyes were absolutely stunning, and he was so sweet and handsome. He was always laid back and could be so cute.

I was pulled out of my thoughts by a sudden yelp. *Elijah...* I don't know how I knew it was him; I just did. He had always been the ideal target. He was pretty easy to push around due to how shy he was. Soon enough he had gone into his kitsune form, ran back to me, and was now cowering behind me.

"Adorable..." Xzavier sneered as his dragon wings unfurled. I had noticed a gash over Elijah's chest that went to his front left paw. *That's where his father cut him.* He had trusted me enough to tell me about what his father had done to him as a kid. From what I knew, his father had always been a little unstable and had Capgras syndrome when Elijah was younger. There was a reason why he had nightmares and PTSD.

"Leave him alone, Xzavier!" I ordered as my hand came to rest on the hilt of one of my katanas and I drew it. I was lucky I did because I barely managed to block a burst of Mana. Then one of the two combat training instructors appeared, *Lila*.

"Quit it, Xzavier!" she ordered. "You okay, Seth?" she questioned.

"Yeah."

"Same," Elijah said. He was now in his human form, standing behind me, his hand over the gash on his chest. "I guess I should head to medical, shouldn't I?"

"Yes," Lila said, clearly amused at Elijah's attitude as I nodded my head.

"I'll come with you, Elijah," I insisted. He nodded as we started to walk to the infirmary. I noticed that he had already used magic to stanch the bleeding.

Elijah

I was seeing stars, but I didn't want to worry Seth. But no matter how hard I tried I knew I would pass out eventually from just how deep the wound was and the blood loss before I managed to stop the bleeding. I was just hoping we would get to medical before then. It was just my luck that I ended up passing out halfway there.

Seth

"Elijah!" I yelled, surprised. I just barely managed to catch him; I hauled him against my side with his arm over my shoulders. As I carried him into medical, one of the nurses, Charlotte, jogged over and led me to an open bed.

"What happened?" Charlotte asked as I laid Elijah down on the bed.

"Xzavier," I said in an annoyed tone. Charlotte was a good friend of ours, she knew how Elijah was, the trust issues, shyness, etc. she just didn't know he had nightmares or what his trauma was. And nearly everyone knew how Xzavier would try to mess up anyone he could, especially the easy targets.

That night Elijah woke up screaming from nightmares, jolting me awake from my own restless sleep sitting next to the bed.

"Hey, Elijah... You're okay," I whispered, my voice gentle. I reached over and wrapped my arms around his shaking body.

"Seth..." he murmured. He wrapped his arms around me too, seeking comfort.

Elijah

"I love you," I didn't realize I had said it aloud until Seth leaned back and looked at me surprised.

"You... love me?" she inquired quietly.

"Yeah," I said, blushing, "I've had a crush on you for a while..." my voice trailed off. I really hoped that the emotion I saw in her eyes was hope. Then she reached over and cupped my jaw in her hand, and she kissed me. Just a soft tentative kiss against my lips, tentative but ever so perfect.

Seth

"You need to rest, Elijah." I said gently. He gave me a desperate look before stuttering, "N-no I-I can't sleep." I looked at him for a second before sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"Lay down," I said firmly.

"Okay..." he said, his voice quiet and obedient. I laid down next to him, cuddled against his side, and then put my head on his chest. Being careful as not to hurt him.

Elijah

I had been hesitant to sleep, but with Seth cuddled next to me, I thought, *maybe I'll be able to*. As both of us drifted off, I felt content.

Ryleigh Kuehl

Hays Middle School

6th Grade, 2nd Place

Friends Beyond Color

The hot August sun shone on my back and the top of my head. The cool breeze gently blew through my straight blonde hair as I walk to Washington Elementary. I see other kids of all ages walking to school laughing, talking, and just enjoying their time together before they have to go their separate ways. Cars of creamy white, dusty brown, and jet blacks drive by, they're either going to work, or perhaps dropping off their kids.

I enter the burgundy brick school to teachers standing outside their doors waving and smiling to the students either entering their classrooms or simply walking by. As for me, I walk into classroom 35. This year I'm in fifth grade, which is Mrs. Forrester's class. I've never really liked Mrs. Forrester, she's short-tempered, rude, and it's very hard to please her. Unfortunately, her niece, Annie Benson, is JUST like her aunt. Annie mocks and ridicules other students, and she ALWAYS gets her way.

Although I don't like Mrs. Forrester, her classroom is very nice and well organized. She has plants by her windows, all of our text books lined up on a bookshelf, and all of our desks in straight rows. I read Mrs. Forrester's blackboard, 'August 21st, 1963- Welcome to Mary Forrester's Classroom. Your seating chart is on my desk.' I walk over to Mrs. Forrester's desk and look at the seating chart, it reads, 'Benson Annie, Clark Audrey.' Great, I thought. I'm seated next to the most horrible and rude girl in my grade.

I sit down at my desk and pull out a book to read. I look up from my book to see a girl leaning over Mrs. Forrester's desk looking at the seating chart. Her hair was jet black and very curly, her skin is brown like chocolate. She had an azure blue bow clipped at the back of her head. She wore a wine red dress with a white belt, knee-high socks, and shiny black shoes.

She got up and made her way towards the back of the classroom. She sat down and got out a book. I got up from my seat but, before I could walk over to her and introduce myself, Mrs. Forrester came into the classroom so I went back to my seat. Mrs. Forrester read out all of our names until she finally read out 'Judith Wayne'. Mrs. Forrester told Judith that she didn't want her to cause trouble like her brother did. Judith had a look of irritation in her eyes but she didn't say anything back to our teacher.

Finally, after one hour of Mrs. Forrester talking, we were allowed to go outside for recess. Kids from all different grades rush outside to go to recess. Some go to the swings, others go to play baseball, and some just sit down and talk to their friends. I see Judith sitting under a shady tree reading a book. I walk over to Judith and sit down next to her.

The grass is nice and cool, the gentle breeze made it so we weren't completely warm. Judith said a small, 'Hello'. I think, 'Maybe she doesn't like to talk?' I bent over to see what book she's reading, it turns out she's reading one of my favorite books, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. I was going to ask her what her favorite book is but she cut me off by saying that it's probably not a good idea for a white girl to talk to a colored girl. I'm taken aback by this, however I told her that it doesn't matter to me what skin color she has, I just want to be her friend. Judith's eyes went wide in surprise. I lastly told her it shouldn't matter what skin color you have, everyone is worthy of dignity and respect.

Most people today think it's unacceptable to be friends with someone who's not white. My parents think that way, my classmates, and even my teachers think that way. I don't know why a person would think so little of another person just because of their skin color. And probably the worst part about it is if one person is not the same as everybody else, then they are worth nothing. The bell rang, I got up from under the tree, and extended my hand towards Judith. She hesitantly took it and we walked inside.

Over the first few months of school Judith became my best friend. We both have a love for books and learning. Judith told me it's her dream to be a nurse like Florence Nightingale. She's read Nightingale's book: *Notes on Nursing* about six times. I want to become a teacher so I can educate kids and help them become successful.

Today after recess, Judith and I came back into the classroom. Judith went to her desk and I went to mine. Annie and her group of friends came up to Judith and began to bully her and say the most impertinent comments towards her. Judith just sat there quietly, she didn't say anything back. Her back is straight, her head is held high. She didn't look at them, she just... ignored them. Even through her calm demeanor I can see tears welling up in her dark brown eyes.

I yell at Annie and her friends, telling her to leave Judith alone. Annie just laughs and says it's all a joke. I got up from my seat, came behind Annie and pushed her away from Judith. I didn't push Annie very hard but she made it overly dramatic. She began to cry fake tears. Her friends began to comfort her while she was crying and saying how much her ankle hurt.

And right at that moment Mrs. Forrester came into the classroom with a look of worry on her face. Annie, through her sobs, told her aunt that I had pushed her to the floor. Mrs. Forrester furiously told me to apologize to Annie. Imitating Judith, I stood tall and lifted my head high, and simply said, 'No'. Mrs. Forrester immediately took my arm roughly and told me I was going to have a talk with Mr. Ashford, our principal.

I sat in Mr. Ashford's office and waited for them to come in. When Mrs. Forrester and Mr. Ashford came in, both of them gave me a VERY stern lecture for about an hour. My punishment was my recess privileges were taken away for three days.

I left that office sad that I don't get recess for three days, but I also left with something more, bravery. It didn't matter that I got a punishment, it matters that I did the right thing.

The next day, I walk to school with the rest of my classmates. I see Judith waiting at the gate for me. She told me thank you for standing up for her, I told her it was no problem and head to the doors of the school. We look at each other, smile, and walk into school hand in hand. Together.

*"I have a dream that one day little black boys and girls will be
holding hands with little white boys and girls."*

Martin Luther King Jr.

Gianna Ochoa
TMP-Marian Jr. High
6th Grade, 3rd Place

The Unexpected Storm

The wind whipped my hair.

"Dad, are you sure there isn't going to be a tornado?" I yelled over the wind. The sky was dark, and you could see lightning in the distance.

"No, nothing like that should happen," Dad reassured. I don't know why but that didn't make me feel any better. I was terrified of the towering gray clouds and the wind was picking up fast. Shriveled up in my seat, I sat hugging myself to keep from freezing. I was soaked from the icy Wilson Lake water and the wind did not help in the least bit. But, I was determined not to turn into an ice cube before my imaginary tornado sucked me up. I was so lost in thought that I didn't even realize we had pulled up to the dock and I wasn't being sprayed with water anymore.

"Come on Rayna," my dad's words barely made it to me over the wind, "we have to get out of here as fast as possible and I need your help."

"Okay," I whispered. Then, I slowly stepped onto the old mossy dock. My dad handed me the wet rope tied to the jet ski to keep it from floating away. He then ran up the hill with my mom right on his heels to get to our Jeep quickly. I sat down on the rough concrete. *I hope my dad is right. I don't know what I would do if a tornado formed.* Then suddenly it started to sprinkle. Just then, I heard a car approaching. I got up from the ground and turned around to see if it was my parents.

"Hey, don't let go of the rope! We will be over soon," Dad reminded from the drivers seat of the Jeep.

"I know, Dad," I announced. He backed the Jeep down the boat ramp a little bit. Mom jumped out of the car and came to stand by me.

I hollered at my dad, "Stop! Stop! You're good."

My mom argued back, "No, keep going. Keep going!" It is a routine now of what to do when we pack up from going to the lake. I hold the rope to the jet ski while mom and dad get the car. When they get back, mom gets out of the car and stands with me. We both argued over if my dad has backed up far enough into the water. *Which I am always right.* Then he gets out and drives the jet ski onto the trailer. Finally, we all get in the car, dry off, and head home. At least that is how it is supposed to go on a normal day. But today isn't a normal day.

"Okay. Thank you," my dad replied obviously overwhelmed. Just then, around two miles away, huge lightning struck. My dad laughed at my reaction. *It was so big! How was I not supposed to look shocked?*

I ordered my dad, "Stop it!"

"Oh relax," Dad remarked, "you'll be fine." He then hopped out of the car and jumped onto the jet ski. He started it up by using the yellow key followed by a roar of the engine. Bubbles floated up to the surface of the green water at the back of the jet ski. He then effortlessly drove the jet ski up onto the trailer.

I groaned, "Dad! Are we almost done? I want to get out of here."

"Yes, we just have to dry off and I think we can get out of here," my dad said. Finally, even though it hasn't been long, it feels like an eternity has gone by.

Dad fastened the jet ski into place on the trailer and motioned for mom and I to get in the car. I walked over to the Jeep and could hear the sloshing noise of our feet interfering with the waves. The waves were getting bigger and bigger from the howling wind. When we got in the car, I unbuckled my life jacket with a click. I breathed out a sigh as my body wasn't being suffocated by the life jacket anymore.

I always bring a separate pair of clothes after we get off the lake so I am not freezing and so I don't smell like rotten fish. But this time I didn't feel like changing. So, I just wrapped up in a partially wet towel. I tried to get comfortable, but I was so focused on making sure my imaginary tornado wouldn't come true.

I silently prayed. *Don't let anything happen to us. Caleb and Maggie are still at home waiting for us to return.*

I looked out the window at the trees passing by. The trees clung to their leaves as if the wind was playing tug of war with them. All the sudden, the sprinkling rain stopped. *Finally, we're out of the reach from the clouds now!* Turning around to look out the opposite window I saw the other side of the storm and it was like nothing I have ever seen before. The clouds were perfectly white on top, fluffing out everywhere like shaving cream, but underneath it looked deadly. It didn't seem real.

"Wow! Dad! Dad!" I excitedly shouted.

"What do you want now, Rayna?" Dad asked.

"Look out the right window!" I marveled, "the clouds look amazing!"

"Wow! Hey, Brandi can you get a photo of that?" Dad begged.

Mom responded, "Yeah, oh Rayna, can you help me? I can't hold my phone straight."

“Sure,” I replied. Taking the phone, I took a picture of the storm and then handed it back to mom. My dad asked my mom to look on the weather station to see if we would miss the storm on the way home. Nope. We’re going to drive right through it. I wasn’t looking forward to that.

We got to the on-ramp for interstate. Now we are face to face with the storm. It is moving towards us, and we are moving towards it. It is very windy and I am more afraid now than I was at the lake. We enter the unknown. I exhale feeling better now because it just seems like a regular storm.

“Oh my gosh dad!”

“What?”

“Is that a tornado?”

“Wait I think it is. Oh, it’s forming over us!”

I think my chest was ready to explode as the tornado touched ground, “Are we going to be okay?”

“Take a video! Take a video! And yes, we are going to make it out of this.” Dad passed me his phone and I took the video, but it was hard to see because all the dirt and rain swallowed it up. *Why would dad want me to take a video at a time like this?* I looked out my window now and gasped at what I saw. In the ditch was a flipped car. Just then something hit the front of the car, and a few sparks flew. I covered my head and body with my towel so if the window broke, I wouldn’t get hurt. But then the wind stopped, the rain stopped, there wasn’t any more dirt or rocks in the air, and there wasn’t a tornado anymore. We had passed the tornado, and we were all alive. There were some dents in the car though. Even though nothing happened to us, I now know that any moment can be the end, so we must cherish both the good and tough times.

Rayna LaFond

Hays Middle School

6th Grade, Honorable Mention

A Lot Can Happen in Two Minutes

“And that’s why this is so important. Because one day...” I heard the teacher say, his voice monotone. I was falling asleep, and I didn’t care. I mean, why would you want to listen to some guy talking about how you’re going to use trigonometry in the future? I know I don’t want to, even if I don’t make it to the future.

Suddenly, the bell rang. I got up, grabbed my books, and walked out of the room.

While I was walking to my locker, I heard someone call my name. Naturally, I turned around to see the star football player, Ezra Garcia. As he jogged over to me, he shoved past people as if they weren’t even there.

“Oscar, my man! Did you get the paper like I told you to?” he asked, looking at me with a fake smile.

I stayed silent, looking at him. My palms were sweaty, knees weak from fear. After a few more seconds of silence, I spoke, “No, I didn’t. I’m not going to risk getting in trouble just because you refuse to study for the math test. It’s really not that hard.”

His fake smile dropped. He stared at me and clenched his fists. Right before I opened my mouth to say something, he grabbed a handful of my hair, my curls wrapping around his fingers. I let out a grunt of pain before he shoved me into the wall. Tears ran down my face. He was about to say something when the principal broke us up. Great, now I’m late to art and my head hurts. Lovely. I took a deep breath, my head pounding, and I speed-walked to art down the hall.

“You’re late,” Mr. Scott grumbled. “That’s a write up!”

I just nodded. My head was hurting too much for me to care. My eyes scanned the room for an empty seat before landing on the chair next to my girlfriend’s brother, Ashton. He greeted me with a soft smile.

Mr. Scott announced, “Your table partner is going to be your partner for the big project. I don’t wanna hear any complaining.”

For 35 minutes straight, Ashton and I searched online for inspiration until we found what we wanted to do, a large sculpture in the shape of the mythical creature called the Chimera. Once class ended, I said bye to Ashton and we went outside to go home.

Once I reached my house, I walked in to see my dad sitting there, face red.

“Where were you?” he demanded.

“I was-” I trailed off, my eyes moving to the sharp tacks lined up in the corner. My heart dropped and my heels started to ache.

“ANSWER ME!” he shouted.

It was like I went mute. No matter how much I tried, my body wouldn't let me talk.

"Get in the corner. Take off your shoes and socks; you better keep up your heels. Do you understand me?"

I nodded, and I did as he said.

Crack!

As he brought his leather belt on to my back, it made a sound like a whip. The belt caught me so off guard that I let my heels drop. My eyes widened and welled up with tears from the combined pain of the belt and my heels being stabbed by the sharp tacks. I opened my mouth, and I managed to get out a few words.

"Stop hurting me!" I shouted, tears streaming down my face.

He looked at me with disbelief before sending me up to my room, and I did so without second thoughts. Once I got to my room, I pulled the tacks out of my heels.

After I finished, I set a timer for two minutes, and I searched around my room for something strong and sturdy, yet flexible and light. Finally, I found an old six-foot long charger that was exactly what I was looking for. I looked up on my ceiling and saw a hook before looking at the chair by my old desk. I tied a noose with the charger. I hooked the loop on the opposite end of the charger to the hook on my ceiling before placing my chair underneath.

Right before I went through with my plan, my phone lit up with a call from Ashton. I stopped my timer and answered.

"Hey, Ozzy, could you come over? I need some help with the math homework," he said with his usual cheery voice.

I turned off the alarm completely, and I put my shoes and socks on before sneaking out of my window and running to Ashton's house. Once I got to his house, I caught my breath when suddenly Ashton opened the door and invited me in.

"Take your shoes off please!" he said in his sweet tone.

I obeyed, and he gasped as his eyes wandered down to my feet. I followed his gaze, and I saw my socks too. My eyes widened; I had completely forgotten about what happened earlier.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice now filled with sadness and concern instead of the usual joy and excitement.

I started crying while I told him everything about my stepdad. I spoke for what seemed like hours before he asked me, "What about your real dad?"

I froze and my mouth dried. My heart started to ache with sadness, "My dad, he uh... he died in a wreck when I was five." I took a deep breath before continuing on, "When I was on my way to kindergarten, some guy swerved to avoid hitting a deer and because the roads were so slick, the man slid and crashed into our car. He hit the side my dad was in, and he passed away. The ambulance was too late."

Ashton comforted me until I fell asleep. About three hours later, I woke up to a loud knocking. I got up and looked out the window, and I saw my stepdad.

I immediately ran to my girlfriend's room, and she hid me in her closet. I heard the front door open, followed by shouting and the front door slamming shut. After I was sure my dad left, I went back downstairs and I stayed close to Amber and Ashton until the next day.

The next day I went to school with them and after school finished, I stayed at their house until dinner. Instead of being met with my dad angry on the couch, I saw my mother with my things.

"Take everything you can and go to Ashton's house, please. I can't stand seeing you get hurt any longer," she said, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"What about you? I can't let you stay with him; he'll hurt you!" I remember asking her.

"I'll be fine," she responded.

I reluctantly obeyed. I made my way back to Ashton's house, making sure I wasn't visible just in case my dad was near and I didn't know. Ashton let me in without any second thoughts, and he immediately helped me get settled in his room so he and Amber could be there for me if something happened.

The next day I went to school with them, and I came home with them. That cycle continued for three years before we all graduated. Instead of moving out to live on my own, I got an apartment and we all lived together permanently. It felt so natural to be with just them.

Ashton and Amber were my true family, blood or not.

Arianna Cantrell-Diaz

TMP-Marian Jr. High

7th Grade, 1st Place

The Perseverance of Jett Johnson

It's been a long day; I just want to go home. So, when the bell rang for 8th hour, I ran straight to my mom's car.

When I stepped into the car my mom said, "Your brother saw a doctor today, and now he has to see a specialist out of town to get the right treatments to help him. You are going to have to stay home alone for a few days." I didn't know what to say or how to react, so the car ride home was silent.

When we got home, everyone started packing frantically.

As my mother sat down, she said to me, "Take care of the house, walk to school in the morning, and there is food in the fridge. We'll be back in two days."

Now my family is gone. I am sitting alone watching TV when all of the sudden my show got interrupted by the news, "Alert, a hurricane is headed to Florida; it will hit in a little less than 24 hours. Anyone in the surrounding area needs to evacuate immediately," said the weather reporter.

My heart dropped. I started to worry and shake, even sweat. I was unable to speak. What was I going to do? I knew it was time to get to work. I started boarding up the windows with leftover wood from the garage. It was a struggle to drill into it, but I eventually figured it out. After that I got sand bags from a local store near my house and put them all over in front of any doors. I kicked on the TV, "The hurricane is almost to Florida, this is the last call to flee." I felt nervous inside, hoping this wasn't going to be a bad hurricane like the last one.

I started to hear the wind picking up and the rain hitting the side of the house. I started walking down the stairs, hearing them squeak every step I took when I finally got to the bottom and saw water on the carpet. If I stay in the house any longer, it won't be safe. I decided to try and walk to my neighbor's house. I kicked the sandbag away from the door and stepped outside. I felt like I was going to blow away, so I started running as fast as I could. Suddenly, I slipped on the wet concrete next to the basketball goal in my driveway.

I laid there not knowing what to do. I couldn't move my body. The rain was coming down hard on my face. I was in such shock I couldn't even cry. Then I heard my neighbor yell at me, but I couldn't make out what he said. After this I must have blacked out because I don't remember much of what happened next. All I remember was me lying on a stretcher, freezing cold and soaking wet. Eventually I made it to the hospital.

Almost immediately a doctor came rushing into my room to see what was wrong. He then explained he was going to do an MRI or something. I didn't feel like asking any questions, so I just agreed to it. Dr. Rick left the room for a little while, but when he came back he took me to a different room.

The MRI felt pretty quick. I think I fell asleep because the next thing I remember was after the MRI, and I overheard the doctors talking about me outside my door.

The first thing I heard was Dr. Rick, "Do you know who found him? His parents aren't here."

The nurse replied back, "I know his neighbor found him and that his parents are out of town."

Dr. Rick said all I had was a minor concussion. I heard Marcy starting to walk closer to my door, so I shut my eyes fast. When she walked in I slowly opened them as if she woke me up by coming into the room.

When she saw me she said, "How are you feeling?"

I whispered back to her, "I'm feeling better, just tired."

She then asked me where my parents were. I told her it was a long story and explained.

She told me she is going to have to make a call to my parents. Thirty minutes go by and I'm starting to worry where she is, when all of a sudden nurse Marcy walks in, "I have some bad news, Jett." I started to get nervous. "Throughout today your brother has gotten worse. When your parents stepped out of the room to get lunch; he had a seizure and passed away suddenly. Your mom and dad told me to say they are extremely sorry and will be headed to the hospital as soon as they can." My stomach hurt. I was crying and shaking. I just couldn't wrap my head around what was happening.

When my parents got there, they looked at me like they had been crying for a while. My mother ran into my room when she saw me and gave me a big hug asking if I was okay. I just cried into her arms until I couldn't anymore. After a while Dr. Rick said I was good to go home, so we checked out and went to the car.

On the car ride home, my parents were asking me a bunch of questions and kept on apologizing. I just sat there and listened, but then I finally said under my breath, "What even happened?"

My mom answered, "He had a seizure because of his medication he was on." As I looked at my mom, I sniffed my nose, then she quietly said under her breath, "It's all going to be okay." I just shook my head like I agreed.

After that awful car ride, we finally made it home. When we walked in, I was headed straight to my room, and I didn't plan to leave it until dinner.

Two days later, it's still sad and exhausting. I suddenly remembered the basement was flooded with water. I was so busy with my brother that I forgot about it. That night I decided to tell my parents, but it didn't seem to bother them as much as I thought. They probably just saw it as another thing to do or it could be that Jared's funeral was tomorrow and they had to prepare everything and get the after dinner setup.

The next morning, I had to get up early and prepare myself for the funeral. My parents seemed really sad, but they cheered up slowly when they started seeing their family and friends. For me overall it was a pretty tough day. I had to say a speech about him on stage in church. I was afraid I was going to mess something up or start crying.

That night in bed I prayed and prayed he would make it to heaven. I had total faith he was going to.

It has been one month since the whole accident, and I am doing much better as well as my parents. The basement got fixed up. We even got a swing in my backyard with my brother's name engraved on it, to show our love for him. This story shows that you can get through it no matter how big or little the problem is. If you just keep having perseverance and believe you can do it, it will happen.

Avryn Beiker
TMP-Marian Jr. High
7th Grade, 2nd Place

The Right People

Sean was not a normal 8-year-old boy. He was shy and was bullied often for being a know-it-all kid in class. He struggled to make friends because they always thought he was a smarty-pants.

One day in class, Mr. Walker said, "We are starting a new math lesson today." Mr. Walker turned to the board and started writing problems for the kids to answer. All of the students stared at the board like he was writing in Spanish, but not Sean.

Sean, without even raising his hand, shouted out the answers before the teacher could even get done writing all the problems. Mr. Walker did not yell at him for doing so. Instead, he turned around and told Sean calmly, "You need to stay in for recess."

The whole class giggled quietly amongst themselves as Sean put his head down.

"Yea, you little know-it-all. Stay in for recess!" said one of the boys behind him.

The bell rang and all of the students went to recess but Sean. Once everyone left, Mr. Walker walked up to Sean with a piece of paper. It had multiplication, division, and fraction problems. "Can you solve these?" asked Mr. Walker to Sean.

Sean looked at the teacher and then at the paper. Then, he grabbed his pencil and began to write the answers to the problems. Mr. Walker asked him how he knew how to solve them, and Sean told him he learned it from YouTube one summer when he was bored. He told Mr. Walker that he doesn't have any friends to play with, so he just spends all of his time learning how to do math.

The next week came and Sean nervously walked in for his first day in third grade. Immediately, kids were whispering, and Sean felt like he was right back in second grade and was going to be made fun of again by his peers. He kept his head down and sat in his seat.

"Sean! Sean!" someone yelled from behind him. "Is it true you taught yourself how to do math?"

Sean looked up and turned to the person speaking to him. It was a boy wearing glasses and a Harry Potter t-shirt. Sean loved Harry Potter. "Yeah, I taught myself how to do multiplication and division last summer."

The boy behind him told him that it was really cool and that he should stay after school because they have a club he should join called STEM. Sean was excited to be invited to something and eagerly told the boy, "Yes!"

The end of the school day couldn't come soon enough for Sean. He walked to the room with his new friend, Travis, for the meeting. When he opened the door, his mouth dropped open. There were students working on crazy math problems on the whiteboard, and there was even a boy controlling a robot.

"Hey, guys! This is my new friend Sean," said Travis. Sean shook hands with the STEM club members. "He taught himself how to do math last summer!"

Sean's face turned red, but this time it was not from embarrassment for being made fun of, it was from excitement of having somebody think it was cool that he was smart. Sean slowly looked around the room filled with science and math and smiled. He had finally found his people.

Louden Schumacher
TMP-Marian Jr. High
7th Grade, 3rd Place

Goodbye

My name is Will Parker. I am 14 years old and going into 9th grade. On the first day of school, I walk in the building nervous of what the new year might bring. As I am walking down the hallway to my locker, I pass a group of bullies all gathered around the meanest kid in my grade, Jack. I think I hear one of them say my name, but I ignore it.

A few minutes later, I hear the school bell ring. The bell brings back horrible memories of running down these halls trying to get to class on time. I take my seat in the back left corner of the classroom. Once everyone else is in the classroom and the bell rings again to signal the official start of the school year, the teacher begins to speak.

“Hello, everyone! I am Mr. Connors, and I am very excited to be your math and science teacher this year!”

“No, really? I think as I glance at the giant poster on the wall right next to my seat that spells out, “Math is Fun.” Classes for the rest of the day include listening to the teachers talk about themselves as if we didn’t have most of them as teachers last year.

After school, my mom picks me up and takes me home. I watch TV for a couple of hours until dinner is ready and my dad, John Parker, is home from work. The family gathers at the dinner table as I get my food.

“So how was your first day, Jessie?” my mom asks. Jessie is my little sister, weird, annoying, smug, the whole shabang.

“Good,” she replies. “My teachers are really nice!”

Then my mom looks at me as if to say, “And how about you?”

“School was okay,” I told her admittingly.

After dinner I took a shower, watched TV a little more, and went to bed.

In the morning, I got dressed and went to the kitchen to make myself a bowl of cereal. I was watching my phone and finishing my cereal when everyone else started to wake up and do their morning routines. After a while I put my bowl in the sink and sat on the couch waiting for everyone to get ready so we could leave. After a while of waiting, I decided to just take the bus; it would get to my house any minute anyway. My dad was walking around telling Jessie and my mom goodbye and finally came to me.

“Goodbye, Will,” he said walking out the door. I didn’t even look up from my phone...

At school, it’s just another boring day with the occasional name calling and the teachers actually starting to teach.

After school, I am sitting on the couch checking my emails on my phone when I hear a knock at the door and my mom comes into the room to answer it. I hear them talking but can only make out three words: “John. Is. Dead.”

My heart suddenly stops, I listen carefully to make sure what I heard is correct, and I hear two more words: “Car. Crash.”

I run over to my mom and hug her, still trying to comprehend what I just heard. I hope that it can’t be true, but the feeling of her tears falling on my head confirm my worst fears.

The day before the funeral at school I still can’t stop replaying that moment in my head. My dad was saying goodbye to me for the last time, and I didn’t even look at him. The bell ringing jolts me out of my head. I walk to my locker and see Jack and a few of his friends walking up to me.

“Hey, Will,” he says with a smug look on his face. “How’s your dad? Oh, wait, I forgot he died.” In that moment, I felt a rage inside me that I have never felt before. Without hesitation, I swung my school laptop right at his face.

Crash!

The laptop seems to explode upon impact with his head. Bits and pieces of the inside of the laptop and shards of glass from the screen go flying across the hall as I am only holding a fraction of the computer in my hands now. Jack fell to the floor, his face bloodied. A couple of teachers rushed over to help Jack and one took me to the principal’s office. After a phone call to my mom and a whole lot of yelling later, I am stuck with five months of being grounded and a three-week suspension.

The day of the funeral, I am sitting in the back left corner of the church. My mom walks up to me, “Will, they are going to close the casket. Would you like to say goodbye to your father and maybe say a few words about him?”

My legs are shaky as I walk up there. I see my dad, the same man who had said his final goodbye to me only two weeks ago.

“My dad was a great man, he taught me how to shave, how to ride a bike, and how to throw a ball. I could have told him I love him, or asked him for a ride, but I didn’t.”

I wish I could say I went up there and said all that stuff about my father, but I didn’t...

I didn’t value my father as much as I should have, I know that now. Now I never leave without telling my family members I love them, and I cherish every moment I have with my loved ones. I encourage everyone to do the same.

Mason Lonnon

TMP-Marian Jr. High

7th Grade, Honorable Mention

The Dreamer

“Beep!” “Beep!” “Beeeeeeeeep!”

I can recall everything the day Dad died. It was a cool, fall day. They had called Stacy and me into the office. We both knew that our dad had little time left. His lungs had basically given out.

“Mom?” Stacy questioned, “what happened to you?”

“Oh, honey,” Mom said, “I don’t know how to say this, but your dad died.”

I was crushed. In that moment I felt as if the world was caving in on me.

Stacy was hugging Mom while crying in her arms. I just sat there staring at the wall wondering why it had happened to me.

When we got home, Mom said she wanted to talk to us about Dad.

“I’m thinking of selling the house since I can’t pay for it anymore.”

“WHAT!” we all exclaimed. “You can’t!”

“I’ve already found a buyer, and there is a new house that is a lot cheaper.”

“Where is it?” Stacy questioned.

“About three hours from here,” Mom replied. “It’s about thirty minutes from New York, and it has a forest and no neighbors, so it will be quiet. We are moving in a month.”

That brings us to where I am today, sitting in a car looking out the window as the rain trickles down. I had said goodbye to all my friends and teachers. Stacy was definitely taking it the hardest because she was only eleven.

Once we got to the house, which I had to admit was pretty nice, I unpacked my belongings and went and helped Stacy unpack hers. I peeked into Maddy’s room and saw her lying down with her hands on her face. Maddy is a neat freak, so if something is wrong there is a problem.

“What happened Maddy?” I nagged.

“I can’t find my globe!” she shouted.

Ah yes, her globe. You see, Maddy loves that thing more than she loves her family. She gets so intrigued by how it works. You think she would have grown out of that at fourteen, but no. Apparently it calms her watching the little flakes of snow come back down.

When I was done helping Stacy unpack, Maddy suggested we go down to an old shed.

“Why?” I asked. “How did you know there’s a shed?”

“Ummmm,” she stammered, “I saw it coming into the place.”

So Stacy and I were off to adventure to this shed.

“What do you think we’ll find?” Stacy wondered.

“I don’t know, but we can’t go for long because Mom will get mad,” I explained.

After a few minutes of walking, we found the shed that looked abandoned. It was missing some shingles and had pieces of wooden logs nailed to the front door.

“Whoa!” Stacy exclaimed. “Should we go in or not?”

“I don’t know, Stacy. It seems kind of dangerous. I have an uneasy feeling about this,” I said nervously.

“Oh c’mon, it’ll be fine!” Stacy pleaded.

Stacy knocked on the door, but no response.

“Hello!” Stacy yelled, trying to peek through a window. “Anyone in there?”

“No one’s going to be in there, Stacy. It’s old and abandoned,” I muttered.

“Fine,” Stacy argued. “Just stay there while I go in and look around.”

I sat there staring at the leafless trees when I heard a sound of a twig snapping on the ground.

"Who's there?" I shrieked.

No one answered. It was probably my imagination. I sat back down on the rock for a couple more minutes when I heard it again. This time when I looked up, there was a man chasing me in a mask yelling, "Get back here!" He looked like he was holding something, but I had no time to look since I was already running away back to the house.

When I got back to the house, I was so out of breath that I had forgotten about Stacy! I couldn't go back now or else I wouldn't be able to find my way back, so I just hoped she could hide until morning. I decided I should tell Maddy so she can come help me try to get Stacy.

"Maddy!" I shouted. "Something happened to Stacy."

Maddy, who was always on her phone, peeked up. I told her the full story about what had happened with the man and Stacy.

"So Stacy is trapped in an old outhouse with another man in there with her?" she questioned.

"Yes," I replied, "will you come help me try to find her tomorrow?"

Before the sun was even up, Maddy had gotten me out of bed.

"Wakey wakey," Maddy shouted in my ear. "TIME TO GET UP!"

We tiptoed out the door, making sure not to make a sound just in case Mom was up.

"Was this guy big?" Maddy asked.

"Yes, but he is not fast," I replied.

The rest of the walk was quiet since it had been so early into the morning until we reached the old, broken down shack.

"You're going to hide behind that window, okay?" Maddy whispered. "As soon as I throw this rock into one of the windows, you are going to run in through the front door and find Stacy."

I replied, "Are you sure you don't want me to throw the rock?"

She just shook her head and started tiptoeing to the back door. I sat there patiently waiting for the rock to hit the window.

"PSSSH!" The rock had hit the window very loudly.

I peeked into the window and saw the old man running to the shattered glass. As I ran into a hallway, I heard another rock smash a window and a big scream. I stopped for a second to peek back, but it was drowned out by the loud cries coming from a room. I ran in the room to see Stacy tied up to a chair.

"Max!" she screamed. "Get me out of here please!"

As I was untying Stacy, I started to hear footsteps coming down the hallway. I hoped and prayed they were Maddy's.

"Guys!" she shouted.

"In here!" we both wailed.

"Where is the man, Maddy?" I questioned.

"He's knocked out in the living room," Maddy explained. "One of the rocks must have hit him in the head."

Stacy said, "Let's get out of here; this place is starting to creep me out."

As we ran back to the house, Stacy realized something was weird and off about her.

"When he found me, he put me to sleep with this sleeping gas and ever since I've had this itch behind my neck," Stacy uttered.

"That's creepy!" Maddy bellowed.

We went to play Monopoly. Then we went to bed never knowing who the man was or what he was after. That's when I heard the noise. I looked up in my pitch black room to see a man in a mask and a girl with a mask standing right next to him.

"Wakey wakey," the man and the girl said together. I was amazed and shocked as I saw the girl; I thought I knew her. Wha-? Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep! What are you doing here?

"Max, wake up honey!" Mom shouted. I opened my eyes to see me in my old room, still alive and well. Mom continued, "Hey, instead of playing video games today, how about you do something productive and go explore the forest or something?"

"NO!" I shouted.

Mason Rozean

TMP-Marian Jr. High

8th Grade, 1st Place

You Were My Everything

I walk in the halls, hand in hand with my boyfriend, who also just so happens to be my best friend. I would do anything for him, and I just know he would do anything for me. When he's around I swear I must be the happiest girl in the world. The feeling of my heart beating and the butterflies in my stomach when he's around, is so very satisfying. It makes me feel loved and cared for.

My boyfriend is tall with blond hair and the has most captivating blue eyes. He also just so happens to be the captain of the football team. His name is Jake. I've known him since kindergarten, though we only started dating our freshmen year of high school. We are seniors now and we've been dating for 4 years! The best part. He has zero red flags, he's perfect. Here he comes now!

"Jake!" I exclaim as he approaches.

"Hey Stella. I missed you." He replies. "Oh hey, did you get the assignment for math done? I was kinda struggling with it."

"Yeah, I did. Here are my notes and my work page." I say handing him the pages.

"Thanks. You're the best." He states, punctuating it with a kiss to my cheek.

"Anytime," I answer.

I had always found it a bit weird that he liked me. He's the captain of the football team and to be honest I'm just a nerd. I'm not arguing though. I love him, more than words can express and I just know that he feels the same.

"Here you go." He says handing me back my papers. "I'm going to go hang out with Isaac. I'll talk to you later though."

"Oh. Yeah ok." I answer a bit discouraged.

"Love you." He tells calmly.

Issac is in his freshman year of college. Jake hangs out with him a lot. More than he hangs out with me. It's ok though. I know he loves me just as much as I love him.

A few hours pass and I sit alone at home when I get a message from Jake.

"Hey, would you like to go to dinner tonight? Just me and you." I read off my dimly lit phone screen.

"I'd love that! Meet you in 30 minutes?" I reply.

"Sounds good! I'll pick you up and take you to Thirsty's at 6:30." He messages back.

I can't help but smile. We haven't hung out in forever! I'm so excited to spend time with him.

I start getting ready. I need to make sure I look perfect for him. I put on a sparkling red dress I bought for special occasions, for this occasion is very special. I even find a pair of red heels to match the dress. I make sure to curl my hair and do my makeup.

At exactly 6:30 Jake comes to pick me up for dinner. He knocks on the door, and I happily greet him. I expected him to greet me with excitement too.

"Oh, that's what you're wearing to dinner tonight?" He sighs.

"Do you not like it? I mean I can go change real quick," I suggest.

"It's too late for you to change now." He says in an upset tone.

"I'm sorry," I muttered. Hurt that I had put all the effort in for nothing.

"Don't apologize." He snaps, "Just don't do it again. Got it?"

"Ok," I say tears welling up in my eyes.

"And now you're crying? Gosh you're so emotional." He fumed. "Go get in the car."

I was shocked. He'd never been so... so aggressive, so angry, so disappointed. I was hurt. I knew he was acting different, acting more distant, but I didn't think he'd act like this.

I didn't talk to him on our way to the restaurant. I didn't know what to say. I wanted to ask if he was ok, but I didn't want to set him off again. I couldn't help but wonder why he was acting like this. He'd never treated me this way. He had always been supportive of me. He would always try to cheer me up and lift my spirits, but now he just brought me down. I just shrugged it off. He probably just had a long day. He still loves me. Right?

We arrive at the restaurant and have a seat inside. Weirdly we sit at a table for three instead of two. I don't think anything of it. I just want to hang out with Jake. We sit down and his demeanor seems to shift. He seems happier which makes me happier. I forget all about my hurt and confusion. He's perfect. He would never hurt me on purpose.

Suddenly I hear him mutter something to himself. It sounded like 'there he is.' I look over to see Isaac. I look back at Jake confused and kinda hurt when I see him gesture for Isaac to join us.

"Oh hey, Isaac is gonna join us for dinner tonight." He says like it's nothing.

“Wait, what?” I question, “I thought you said it was just gonna be us two tonight.”

“I know but Isaac wanted to hang out, so I just invited him to dinner.” He states.

I try to say something, but I’m interrupted when Isaac comes and sits down.

“Hey Jake,” Isaac says, “oh hey Bella? Wait that’s not right. Is it-”

“It’s Stella.” I state annoyed and hurt.

“My bad.” Isaac says and glares at me.

“Hey. There’s no need to be rude to him Stella.” Jake fumes.

“I didn’t realize I was interrupting a date.” Isaac says.

“Nah, its fine, she said it was okay,” Jake declares.

“I didn’t say it was okay I didn’t even know he was-” I start.

“Stella enough!” Jake interrupts.

“Sorry I wasn’t aware that my feelings weren’t valid anymore.” I state. “Excuse me for a moment.”

I run off to the restroom. I can’t believe Jake did that. What was wrong with him? Or is it something wrong with me? He probably didn’t mean it. It’s probably just a boy thing. He still loves me. He not actually mad at me. I don’t think he is.

After a moment I return to the table. I see Jake looking at Isaac and smiling a lot. I notice that it continues through out the night, and I even see him blushing a couple times. He almost seems like he likes him more than he likes me. That’s impossible. He loves me. Like I said. He’s perfect and doesn’t have any red flags. I trust him.

After having a few random conversations Jake changes the subject completely.

“Hey, Stella.” He says calmly. “I have to tell you something.”

“Ok,” I say openly.

“I don’t love you, actually I never have.” He tells like it’s nothing.

“W-What?” I say my eyes filling with tears.

“Yeah.” He chuckles. “You were stupid enough to believe that a popular football player like me every liked you? I was using you. I just needed to pass high school classes so I could go to college and date my true love. Isaac.”

My heart drops, and I run out of the restaurant without saying anything. I’m crying so hard my eyes are blurry. So blurry in fact that I don’t see the car speeding down the street... until it’s too late.

Jayde Durham

Hays Middle School

8th Grade 2nd Place

Facing Fears

It was a warm afternoon at Sanatova Lake. I was running around barefoot in the sand. I was around six, so I didn’t quite know how to swim yet. My dad and his two friends were grilling where the sand and grass met.

“Cassy! Come inside to get ready for dinner,” my mom yelled from inside the camper.

“Please, can I have a little bit longer?” I begged. I really wanted to finish my shell collection.

“Only a few more minutes,” she replied, annoyed.

A couple minutes later, Mom yelled, “Cassy!” When I didn’t respond she yelled again, “Cassandra, get in here right now!”

When again no response came, she ran outside to scold me. She instead found me face down in the water around 10 feet out.

I could hear her as she started to cry and knew I should try and do something, but my little body had no fight left. Mom pulled me out of the water and started CPR while yelling at Dad to call for help. He acted as if he didn’t hear her, so she carried my limp body inside to do CPR while calling 911.

That night I didn’t go to the hospital. The paramedics said I’d be fine, so I stayed in the camper with my parents. After I showered and ate dinner, I laid in bed. As I was about to fall asleep, I heard my parents fighting. This had happened before, but this time was different. Mom told Dad to leave, forever. That was the last time I saw him.

The next few years were difficult. With money being tight and fresh heartbreak, Mom and I made it through together. I went to therapy and eventually was fine swimming in the pool and taking baths.

"I don't know what to wear," I called from my closet. I was on the phone with Liv, one of my best friends. We have been inseparable since 8th grade.

Liv and I were getting ready for the first home basketball game of the year. The theme was retro, and I was struggling to find something to wear. We eventually found something with the help of my mom who later drove me to Liv's so we could go to the game together.

"When you get home tonight, I have a surprise for you!" Mom sang. She was in a really good mood.

"Okay, bye. Love you," I replied.

I didn't really pay attention to the game. I kept thinking about what Mom's surprise could be. When I got home, Mom was sitting on the couch with a box wrapped in tropical paper. I found this odd because it was almost Christmas, so I figured this would be a part of a Christmas present.

"What you got there?" I asked.

"Well, why don't you come and find out?" Mom said beaming.

I went to sit by her and open it. It was a piece of paper. It said, "Merry Christmas to you, I love you and your grandparents do, too. Let's go see Nana and Papa! -Mom"

I was in shock.

I had missed my grandparents since I only see them on holidays and sometimes when they came to visit. Yes, I was excited, but I was secretly terrified of the beach.

I didn't tell anyone of my fears, not even Liv. I told her I was so excited and would send pictures.

As Mom and I packed for Mexico, I really thought about going to the beach and convinced myself I'd be fine. I thought maybe it was all in my head and when we got there it would be okay.

Mom and I were sprinting through the airport. We were late for our flight; we were always running late. Once we finally sat in our seats, I played back my best friends' words before I left.

"I'm a little worried about you," Liv said nervously.

I faked a smile and told them, "I promise I'll be fine, and I'll tell you all about it when I get home." Fake it 'till you make it, I guess.

When we landed, Nana and Papa were waiting with signs. I ran to them and gave them both huge hugs.

"Are you ready for your first time in Mexico?" Nana asked.

"I'm so excited! I've missed you both so much. Christmas on the beach!" I exclaimed, but the beach was my issue.

Nana and Papa's beach house looked exactly like a beach house should, like a villa. It had an old feel even though they only built it seven years ago when they moved from the US.

"Why don't you put on your swimsuit and we can head to the beach?" Papa suggested.

I hid my nervousness as I nodded and walked to my room. On the ride there, I was felt shaky. I don't think anyone noticed.

The second I stepped onto the sand, my eyes started to sting. I felt those shells slipping out of my little hands, the air leaving my lungs, and the fight leaving my body. I heard my mom yelling at my dad to call for help as I fell to the ground. I felt everything playing out like it did 9 years ago.

My mom runs to me and I hear her mutter something. I don't know what she says. I am gasping for air trying to get my thoughts straight. I am in Mexico, not Sanatova. I am with my mom, not my dad. I am safe. Finally my mom's voice comes through, "Cassy! Cassy, can you hear me?"

"I can't breathe," I gasp.

"It's okay, just match my breathing," Mom sighs, pulling me closer.

When I finally calm down and we head back to Nana and Papa's, my mom says she wants to talk before I go lie down.

"Kai and Liv warned me," Mom confessed. "I didn't believe them; I said you'd be fine."

"I know, they talked to me too," I admit. "I just don't know why I've been so good. The thought of the beach made me nervous, but I thought I could do it."

"I'm sorry, I wish you didn't have to go through this," Mom said. "It's not fair."

"I know, but maybe we can figure something out," I suggested.

Mom, Nana, Papa, and I spent all night figuring out how I could get used to the beach.

Mom and Papa held my arms while Nana talked about anything and everything she could think of. It worked! The rest of the month I was swimming like nothing ever happened.

After the whole Mexico fiasco, I realized I needed some closure. My mom helped me contact my dad. I told him he ruined so many things in my life and that I didn't think I could ever forgive him.

That helped me recover from everything. It's all better now. I can swim, go to the beach, and do whatever I want without freaking out. I now know if I'm struggling with something, just tell someone. There's no sense in hiding it and letting it grow.

Ashlen Lang

TMP-Marian Jr. High

8th Grade, 3rd Place

Mystery at the Beach House

It's summer, finally summer. I get to relax at the beach and not have to worry about anything. My family and I always go on a week-long vacation with our best friends. This year we are staying at my uncle's beach house.

I had just finished packing when I heard my mom yell, "Jess, come on! We still have to pick up the Browns before we go." The Browns are our friends. They have one kid named Luke. I ran downstairs and out to the car where my parents and little brother, Chris, were waiting.

"Finally. You always take forever," Chris said, complaining.

"Oh, be quiet and practice patience," I replied immediately. We picked up Luke and his family and left for the beach.

When we got to the beach house, I couldn't believe how pretty it was. It had a huge front porch area with a circular pool at the front, a barbeque area, and a fire pit. The house was gorgeous! It had many wooden accents and huge windows.

"I knew your uncle was rich, but I didn't know he was this rich!" Luke said, stunned. I always knew my family had money, but this was still surprising.

That first day at the beach was great. We relaxed, went to new places, and most importantly did nothing important. That night I was lying in bed about to fall asleep when I heard something strange. I figured it was probably nothing and ignored it, but then I heard it again and my curiosity won. I got up and went downstairs to the main floor.

I heard the noise coming from outside. That made me even more curious. When I was about to open the door, I saw a light turn on upstairs. Someone walked down the stairs, and then I saw it was just Luke.

"What are you doing up?" I asked.

"Oh, my gosh!" he said in a loud whisper. "Jess, you scared me. You're standing in the dark, all quiet, and then you just pop out of nowhere. You can't do that."

"Sorry, I didn't know you scare so easily," I said sarcastically.

"I'm getting water, what are you doing?" he asked.

"I heard a sound and wanted to know what it was," I said.

"You always let your curiosity win," Luke added. It's true. I have always been curious and too stubborn to ignore something strange. After Luke got his water, we both headed back up to bed.

I woke up to my mother knocking on my door telling me to get ready because we were going on a boat tour. I got ready and headed out to the car.

When we got there, I saw a huge boat. We met up with the Browns, who took a separate car and we all got on the boat.

As the boat left to the first destination, we began to speed up. When we arrived, we were escorted to the dock and handed a snorkel. When I looked outside, there was a nice cam reef and on the beach a little food shack. We all went snorkeling and had a great time, then headed back up onto the dock to go to the next spot. I turned around to ask Luke a question and saw a man leave the food shack who looked familiar.

"Hey, does that man in the green jacket look familiar?" I asked Luke.

"No, he looks like anyone else," Luke said, confused.

"Oh, well, I'm sure you're right," I said, doubting Luke.

We got back on the boat and continued the rest of the trip. We went all over the island and had a great time, but I couldn't forget about the guy on the beach.

Later that night I was getting ready for bed when I heard the same sound that I heard the night before. I went to Luke's room and woke him up.

"Luke, get up," I said, shaking him awake.

"What? Jess, it's late. I'm trying to sleep," Luke said startled.

"I heard that noise again. I have to know what it is," I shared.

"Why are you waking me?" Luke said, trying to get back to sleep.

"I want you to come with me," I said in a convincing way.

"You're not going to let this go, are you?" Luke said, rubbing his eyes.

Luke got out of bed and we made our way downstairs quietly. We waited to hear the sound again.

"It could just be the wind," Luke said sleepily.

"I know, but what if it isn't?" I said.

I continued to wait for the noise. Then I heard it, and it was louder and different than the others.

"It's outside. Let's go look," I whispered.

"No, Jess, I'm going back to bed," Luke said, annoyed. I gave him a look.

"Fine, let's go look in there," Luke said, giving up.

I opened the door to feel a brisk breeze. Then I saw a small little shed close to the window of the room I was staying in.

"There, let's go look in there," I said, pointing at the shed. This time Luke didn't even bother to argue. As we got closer, I kept coming up with ideas about what the sound could be, but then it was time to open the door. I went to reach for the handle. My heart was pounding, and I was breathing heavily. I knew I had to open it, so I did.

I see a small room. There was a very old couch, a small TV, and trash everywhere. Then I saw the familiar face from the beach. He was in the corner reading a book when he saw us.

"Jess," the voice said.

"Uncle John?" I said, confused. "What are you doing here? I thought you were in France."

"I was," he said very clearly. I looked at him confused. "I never went to France. Lately I've had some small financial issues," he said in a way that made me think there was more to it.

"How small?" I asked curiously.

"The bank wants to take this house," Uncle John said hesitantly.

"Uncle John, you should have told us," I replied.

"Well I was going to, but then your parents asked to use the house, and what was I supposed to say? You guys deserve a relaxing vacation," he said.

"Yeah, so much for relaxing. She has been driving herself crazy trying to figure out what all the noise has been," Luke added, chuckling a little.

"Oh, well the sound could have been anything. I'm very clumsy," Uncle John said, looking around at the mess in the room.

"You can't keep staying here. Tomorrow we will figure something out with our parents, but it is late, so just sleep in the house tonight because it is so cold here," I said shivering.

"Okay," Uncle John said, grabbing a blanket.

The next morning I went downstairs and saw my parents and Uncle John all talking.

"Did you tell them?" I asked Uncle John.

"Yes, he told us," my mom said. "He is going to come live with us for a while after we finish our vacation."

"Great, see Jess? Now you can relax and enjoy the rest of your vacation," Luke said as he walked down the stairs. That is exactly what I did. I relaxed for the rest of our vacation before going home with a little less room in the car now.

Caroline Purinton

TMP-Marian Jr.High

8th Grade, Honorable Mention

Nxyaris

Nxyaris has been hidden behind the veil of darkness for centuries. But I'm the one going to save it.

The dreams aren't new. I've been getting them since I was young. I rarely remembered them, but when I did, no one ever thought that *I* was getting dreams from Selaphis, some who don't believe in Selaphis, except Soren. My best friend. He's never hesitated in trusting me, even when I tell him the most random things that Selaphis showed me, until now.

Soren has seen how Nyxaris has started to crumble under the constant darkness. Most people have. Food has grown scarce, monsters have started leaving the woods, the polluted water, disappearing children, and more recently psychic vampires. They're not really vampires, they're still humans, but feed on people's energy to survive.

"Soren, Selaphis told me I could save Nxyaris. You have to believe me."

"Lyra...there's no way to save Nxyaris. Our future was written from the start. Let it go already. I think you should take a day to heal yourself so you can help others later, alright?"

"Soren—" He's out the door before I can start my sentence. I sigh, flopping onto my bed. I can feel the turmoil within me. Soren has always been the one to believe me without question. Why is he questioning me now? I toss and turn ideas over in my head until I drift off.

"The light must grow, or the city will fall. Find the bloom before it withers. The Solorabloom will die without the sun. You, Lyra, must plant it where the light will touch. Only then can hope be reborn."

I'm in a temple? There's light and warmth. A flower in front of me. Maybe if I grab it, light will return to Nyxaris. I reach for the flower, but it turns to dust in my fingers.

"Time is running out."

I jolt awake, gasping for air. I scramble out of bed, searching for Soren. Then it hits me like a bucket of cold water was thrown over me. He won't believe me. He'll think I'm crazy. I can't tell him. I have to do this on my own. "Now." I barely hear it. A whisper, like the wind through the leaves of the last tree in the center square. "Now Lyra. Leave now. You don't have much time."

I've packed a bag with food and water, a sleeping bag, blankets, sewing kit, med kit, and an extra change of clothes.

"Lyra? What are you doing?"

I whip around my arm halfway into the sleeve of my jacket. I step in front of my bag to hide it.

"Nothing! I'm just doing some...spring cleaning?"

"Lyra, don't tell me you really believe that *Selaphis* is telling you in your dreams how to save Nyxaris, because there is not a single way to do that. You have to understand that. Maybe you need to see a Whisperer. Or even an Alchemist of the Mind."

"No! I'm fine Soren. You have to believe me." "Lyra! Nothing good will come out of you trusting these 'dreams' from Selaphis. You know what happens when people lose it completely."

"I'm not losing it Soren! Selaphis told me—*You have until the Solstice of Ember to save Nyxaris Lyra.*"

"Who was that? Lyra, who was that? Did you hear that too?"

"The Solstice of Ember. That's four days away." I mumble to myself.

"Lyra! Are we just going to ignore the voice that came out of nowhere?" "It was Selaphis, Soren. I don't care if you think I'm crazy and don't believe me, I'm leaving and I'm going to save Nxyaris."

I grab my bag and marched to the door. My hand is on the doorknob when Soren yanks me back.

"You're not going alone. You don't know what's out there or what challenges you'll face. It's better if there's two of us. And I don't know what I'd do if my best friend didn't come back, Lyra. Wait 10 minutes and I'll have a bag ready, okay?"

"Okay."

"Good, now sit down and I'll be right back."

The temple from my dreams. It took us four days to get here.

Monster attacks and bewitched plants. We almost lost our lives to a patch lunaflare ivy. We had to swim across the Blackcurrent River to get away from a fleshweaver. We nearly fell off the Screaming Cliffs into the void below.

But we got through it. And we're going to return light to Nyxaris no matter what gets in our way.

I open the door, covering my eyes from the bright light. Once my eyes adjust, I look around in wonder. "Soren, there's light!" I have to take my jacket and sweater off from the warmth I feel. "And look, it's the Solorabloom!"

I take a step towards the altar where the Solorabloom is when Soren grabs my wrist. "Lyra, I know you're excited, but we still need to be cautious."

"Selaphis lead us here Soren. You really think she would have gone through all this trouble to kill us? Now come on, let's get the Solorabloom back to Nxyaris."

I drag Soren behind me up to the altar. When I touch the Solorabloom, everything goes black, then we're back in Nyxaris. Except the sun is shining. Nxyaris is no longer cursed.

"There's sun Soren!"

That night is a celebration. There's sun in Nyxaris. No more eternal darkness.

"Behold Lyra, your triumph is as radiant as the sun."

Aspen Holmes

Victoria High School

9th Grade, 1st Place

A Detailed Moment

The moment of extreme anticipation while sitting in the car for what felt like forever was only four hours. Me imagining the beautiful scenery of thousands of colorful lights with a stage that shined of bright, black marley flowers. All of the crowd chanting as to who will win the 2023 Kansas City Dance National Finals. I was so excited for this competition that I had been counting down the days until it came. My friends and I worked countless hours at the studio for precise perfection in our dance numbers. Somewhere our minds could rest, and our hearts could do the rest. When blood and tears were shed from memories of the past when dancing when we were younger, as our long step makeup routine was put on and hair was perfectly slicked back.

This competition consisted of 3 major days for me and the rest of the studios. I had six dances. We ran our dances numerous times wherever we could find space, like the hallway to have it sharp in our brains. The reason this was hard was because we were often dodging dancers as they were running from one side of the stage to the other from the back hallway. The dressing rooms were so compact, filled with probably 1,000 people and loud obnoxious noises. Usually I spent most of my time running my dances or staying in the hallway away from the loud noise that hurt your ears. Being in the dressing room could often be very intimidating as I watched other dancers do their challenging routines. Although it gives you a good sense of confidence and competition when watching some.

As the first two days went on, I completed the first five of my dances and placed in several categories, such as top 10 and trophy winners. Although the most exciting thing was definitely Sunday while we were preparing for our national large group line. This would let us compete to be overall champions of the Kansas City dance competition. As I put on my black and blue waved costume I started to feel super excited, but also a little bit nervous. This dance consisted of about 70 people and was very intense with sharp movement. "Are you excited?" my mom said as she headed to the audience. I answered with "Yes, and I am so grateful for all your help." We lined up backstage while I was getting hugs to my best friends as we shared words of encouragement.

As I walked on stage I could feel all the crowd's smiles beam as the music started. Going from place to place while dancing is very challenging, but the best feeling in the world. I spot my friends next to me as we are going as hard as possible. We end the dance all together and walk off the stage breathing so loud that I could not hear anything. Soon after we've caught our breath, smiles emerged from all of our faces. We could feel that we did such a great job. After all the hard work we had been preparing for the last few months. It comes time for awards and we are all sat in a circle with our hands squeezed amongst each other hoping we will make it into the parade of champions.

It comes down to the last few people as the announcer starts to speak. He then says the name of our dance. "Relax, has made it into the parade of champions." We all squeal and jump as we are the most excited team at the competition. Being in the parade of champions means that you'll dance again amongst the other ones that also got chosen. This way, the judges are able to have another look at the intense dance. Our dance number is then filing

backstage again while we are waiting for the number ahead of us to finish. The disco balls are going crazy while we are pumping each other up. The championship backdrop, including colors of purple, blue and pink are shining right at us.

We head onto the stage once again, trying to hold in our heartfelt happiness. We go through the dance going twice as hard as the first time while we are running out of breath. The party starts with blaring music while frisbees are being flown everywhere as soon as we headed on stage, along with black and neon T-shirts. He then starts to announce the final placing champion. We glimmer with our makeup and hair done as we sit with our eyes closed. We then hear... "Your final, placing national champion is... Relax!" That was it we had just won the national final competition with our large group line.

Zoe Dinges

Victoria High School

9th Grade, 2nd Place

Guitars with Mr. Woolf

I got started playing guitar because of my high school PE teacher. He was a huge Foo Fighters fan and loved music. It felt like every time a song played, he'd say, "Yeah, I've been to a concert of theirs." He had been to so many concerts, it was crazy. My PE teacher and I were pretty close, and my parents knew him well too. One day, he brought over one of his guitars and just left it with me.

"You can hold onto it for a while," he said.

I still have that black Fender to this day. He was over at my house recently and asked, "You still got that black Fender?" I laughed and said, "Yeah, I need to give it back." But that was how I got started. After that, I started watching YouTube videos and teaching myself.

There was a time at Hesston College when I played in a band. It was for a talent show, and some of my roommates and guys from the choir needed a guitarist. My roommate knew I played and told them, "Hey, he can do it." So I joined their little band, and we started practicing. We played Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and some Blink-182. That was when I really got into guitar. During college, especially during COVID, I had a lot of free time, so I just played nonstop in my room.

Right now, I own a few guitars, but my favorite is my light blue Epiphone. It's not a Gibson Les Paul, but it's a more affordable version. If you've ever seen AC/DC's red guitar, that's a Gibson, and my Epiphone is kind of like a cheaper version of that. But it's still a solid guitar. I started out on acoustic, but now I'm more into electric. Electric guitars are just fun—they're my thing. My brother, on the other hand, likes acoustic more.

When it comes to songs, I haven't played as much recently, but I like playing "Rest of My Life" by Parker McCollum. I also enjoy playing punk rock with distortion or even some country tunes on acoustic. My music taste is all over the place, so it really depends on what I'm into at the moment.

"You should play something for us," my brother said one evening.

I picked up my guitar and played a few chords, letting the sound fill the room.

I never wanted to play in a band for a living. Guitar was always just a hobby, a way to learn something new and express how I feel. It also helped me meet people and get involved in my church. I play for my church's worship team, and I also play the cajón—the box drum you sit on. It was just another way to connect with others and show my faith.

My parents were super supportive of me playing guitar. They paid for everything, helping me upgrade from my PE teacher's black Fender to better equipment over time. Now, I have a few thousand dollars' worth of guitars and gear. They knew it was worth it.

Before choosing guitar for my Learning Lab, I thought about other hobbies. I considered cooking, painting along with Bob Ross videos, and even gardening. I had a grow light and thought it'd be cool to grow food. It sounds boring, but gardening is an important life skill. Another idea was learning how to make duck calls. My dad used to have a duck call business, and we still have all the equipment, but I never went through with it.

Teaching music in the Learning Lab has been fun, especially when kids really want to learn. Music lets you express yourself in ways words can't. When you hear a song you love and can play it, it feels amazing. I also liked working with the drums. Some kids had trouble with hand-eye coordination, but we figured it out with Mr. Rogers. It was fun to watch them get better.

One funny moment was watching my friend Sam play the drums. It wasn't laugh-out-loud funny, but more like an inside joke. He never tried guitar, but seeing him on the drums and trying to play along was definitely entertaining.

"You sure that's the right beat, Sam?" I teased.

"Hey, I'm trying!" he said, laughing.

Overall, learning guitar has been an amazing journey. It helped me connect with people, explore different music styles, and develop a skill that brings me a lot of joy. Whether I'm playing in a band, teaching kids, or just strumming for fun, guitar will always be a part of my life.

Conner Toon

Victoria High School

9th Grade, 3rd Place

Skin

The air is thin in this bathroom, it left the room quickly and I thought I was suffocating. When I look in the mirror, I know it looks back in disbelief. I don't know what I am, and in this moment, I can't even make out why I am here. But this bathroom stinks of regret, and the only thing I can do is try not to choke.

I'm in some bathroom of a gas station seated off the corner of the interstate. The city grew too dangerous for me, and I'm bathed in sweat when I tear off my shirt, tossing it on the floor. I couldn't be bothered to have a care for hygiene, not right now. My heart rate picks up when I reach down to my backpack, digging the utility knife out of the front pocket. Once the blade is in my hand, I strip my jeans, shoes, and the rest of my clothes off.

I fold the blade out, staring at my shaking hand, once white skin slowly fading into grey. It's one of the clearest signs, other than the aching I feel in my bones, that my skin is coming undone. I look up at the mirror, staring back at the collapse of my chosen form, as the pain sets in. It's been too long since I have fed, and I know there's only one way to speed this process up.

I dug the blade of the knife into this skin, wishing it was mine, as I cut it off of me. If I was human, like I pretend to be, the pain would be excruciating, but instead all I feel is relief as I help the skin off. I start with my back, just below the neck, that part always sheds first.

When the first pile of skin falls onto the floor, leaking my blood onto the ground, I can't help but be disgusted, utterly horrified. And when the rest sheds off, with the help of my knife, relief sets into my bones. The dull pain always sitting in me, culminating right before I shed, fades away.

I feel normal even. Whatever my normal is supposed to feel, but it doesn't last once I get a glimpse of my face, my body.

Horror sets in. There's nothing more horrifying than seeing myself. I'm a lanky mound of raw flesh, a horrible pinkish color. Sharp claws spring from my fingers, and razor sharp teeth line my lipless mouth. I'm completely hairless, and slick blood still coats my skin, fresh from my transformation.

Gone was the form I took, a perfect handsome man, and what was left of him was me. I know I am a monster, nothing but skin and bone. The bloodstain of being me coats my entire being and all that envelops me is pure self-hatred.

All I do is wait, sitting on the cold, unforgiving bathroom floor. The lighting is harsh, fluorescents buzzing in tandem with my pounding heart. Hunger floods me. The only thing keeping me sane is the memory of what came before, a life I tried to make.

I couldn't remember why I decided to take that particular form, the one of a tall, well built, dark-haired man when I could have chosen anyone. I had seen him walking down the street as I peeked through the blinds of the only window in the abandoned house I squatted in. I was young then, how young, I couldn't remember. My history was unfamiliar to me, I couldn't remember when I began, and I never knew when I'd end.

The only time I measured was the time that I knew her.

Rosemary.

I had met her many times before I knew her, stolen glances from windows of her work and home. Before I could have caught it, I began to fall for her. A punishment on the both of us.

Finally, one day, I made a horrible mistake. I approached her. My skin was almost fresh, I had eaten a feast of humans beforehand to ensure that it would stay. I opened my human mouth, working for words that could be right.

“You’re beautiful.” It was the first two words I spoke. Even with my studying of humans, I didn’t think of any other way to start the conversation. But, despite my general awkwardness, she talked to me.

After that interaction, I somehow got a date with her. Then that date led to more, and my feelings grew. Rosemary was the only person who had started to understand me. Whether the fact that she would never truly see me for who I was. I was going to accept that, keep my facade up, and enjoy the only breath of happiness I had.

It didn’t last.

My false name, the human documents I lacked, the distance (physical and emotional) I kept from her, tore the relationship we began to have.

I had been staying in her apartment for a weekend, the first time I had been there with her knowing I was there. She had known me for a few weeks. I was sitting on the couch, reading through one of the books she left on her coffee table. She exited the bathroom, it was morning, the first time I had seen her today.

“James.” She sat down across from me. I looked up, not saying anything.

“Please don’t be mad, I don’t want to hurt you but- I don’t think this should continue, you see I...”

Rosemary said more than that, during that morning. She told me how distant I was, how she barely knew me. How she wanted too, and maybe if I opened up more we could be together. But those first words- they were the only ones that mattered.

I tried to explain it to her. How if she could see me, *really* see me. She would be disgusted. But she didn’t understand. No one ever did. And I made a mistake. A terrible mistake.

Hatred and anger seeped through me. I hated how alien I was, how the world hated me, and I could do nothing to change it. Nobody could ever love a monster.

I tried to be kind. To not be a monster and hurt her. But it happened so fast. Humans are very fragile, you see. I didn’t know my strength, and the sound of her neck breaking, falling onto the floor, still echoed in my brain.

I had to leave the city after that. All wrapped up in grief, I killed. Not even to feed, meat wasn’t what I was hungry for. Then, when the bodies piled up, so did the amount of police looking for me.

But now, sitting on the bathroom floor. I know they’ll never find me. I know I’ll take another form. As the cashier at the gas station knocks on the bathroom door, I know the last thing he’ll see is a disturbing pound of skin scattered across the floor.

Once I open the door, as he looks at my hideous form, the only horror he’ll find is how even after I devour him, he won’t truly end. His skin will be my face and I’ll go on into the night, hoping I don’t have to shed my skin.

Macie Herrman

Hays High School

10th Grade, 1st Place

Blackwood Sanitorium

February 26, 1928

Blackwood Sanatorium, Breakwater Bay, Maine

I am currently scratching this entry down on scraps of paper that I have collected throughout the hospital. I fear that if I didn’t do this, my story would cease to be heard. I would like to start off by stating that I am, in fact, not insane. Or, at the very least, wasn’t at the time that these events took place. The tale I’m about to tell hurts to recall, but for the sake of any other unfortunate soul who dares sail the same waters as I, I will speak it.

I worked on a fishing boat with a crew, journeying out into the deep waters daily aboard our ship called the *Celeste*. The boat wasn’t in very good condition. No, it’s hull was rusted and the fishing crane periodically refused to budge. No matter, it wasn’t my boat, but my captain’s. Captain Mallory was his name. If I had a boat of my own, I would treat it with the respect it deserves. Captain Mallory wasn’t a fisherman as much as he was a businessman. An avaricious man, he would do almost anything for any man who offered a little coin. This meant that every now and then, we would be carrying out tasks for moguls, like carrying their cargo or giving them private tours of the seas, instead of our usual fishing duties.

One day, the captain told us that we would be chartering on a private expedition for some “Dr. Thornhill”. He said that the doctor had found a map to something big, and when we found it, it would make us all very rich. Everyone seemed very joyful at the thought of this. Except me. Very often did we sail for days on end in hopes of some “treasure”, just to turn up with nothing.

The captain also said that we would be sailing hundreds of miles into the blue, which had scared me even more. The *Celeste* simply wasn't built for large expeditions. I had made my opinion clear to the captain, but he dismissed me, his eyes glazed over with promise, as they often were.

The morning we set sail, I noticed a light coming from the captain's quarters in the darkness, but the captain was nowhere to be seen. We waited for the captain to come out, but when he didn't, I knocked on the steel door guarding his room. To my surprise, the captain came to the door swiftly and told us to set sail. His eyes were tired and gray. He handed me a map, as usual, but this time it didn't look like he had created it. The map looked antiquated, the paper yellow and rugged.

There were symbols, not from any language in my memory, around the edges of the paper, surrounding the very vague map of the land. The land appeared to be an island, but it was odd in that it was perfectly symmetrical and round. It appeared to be a multi-layer island, with multiple circles within circles. In the waters surrounding the rings, in English was written "Here be Dragons". Uncharted. The map itself appeared something out of fiction, but something about the captain's look told me it was very real. Everything about this day sent waves of shivers across me, but it would be unwise to question the captain, especially when wealth was on his mind.

The captain told us to set sail, and that we did. Fog covered the ocean, and the wind was rampant. No amount of treasure could persuade me to make this trip on my accord.

When the sun came out, the fog dispersed, and we were in the midst of the open blue, heading north just as the captain instructed. I assumed Dr. Thornhill was reading the map for the captain; I just hoped he knew what he was doing.

The sun didn't show for long, as deep clouds blotted out the sky, making the waters dark and dreadful. Every minute we sailed, the pit in my stomach grew deeper until at last I couldn't bare it for any longer. I met the captain at once and pleaded with him to turn back. He scolded me and commanded me to return to my duties. I begrudgingly obeyed.

At nightfall, we set our sails and went to our sleeping quarters below deck. However, we awoke not an hour into our rest as we had sailed into a rather large storm. Above deck, the rain was icy and heavy. Lightning cracked in the skies above. We fought the storm on the deck.

That's when I saw it, what we all first thought was a wave the size of a mountain. When it didn't move, we noticed that it was a wall made out smooth, black stone. It spread across the horizon so that we could not see past in any direction. It couldn't have been any less than 300 feet tall, a stronghold erected from the midst of the ocean. The captain screamed in delight, and we all knew this is the *treasure*.

Sailing towards it, we found a gate into the wall that could fit ten of the biggest ships side by side. The moment we sailed through the rugged wall, I felt a type of evil overwhelmed me. Past the wall was another wall, and my mind went back to the circles on the map. The walls must be part of larger circles, so large that I could not see them curve.

After sailing through one more gate in the wall, our ship came to a halt at the foot of a large stone staircase. We exited the ship despite my gut telling me not too and made our way up. At the top was a stone monolith, ancient, eldritch symbols etched into the structure and glowed an ethereal blue. At the base was a statement in English that read, "Next is Atlantis, sanctuary of Gods".

Dr. Thornhill approached the monolith, reciting a verse in an ancient, demonic tongue. When he stopped, the wall of stone ahead of us started to open. What was inside the giant, final gate I cannot describe it full, lest I return to madness. What I can describe, a monstrous "man", sitting on a mammoth stone throne. The evil look in his pale face, I cannot remove from my head. Upon looking at that, that *thing*, I prayed for death. It spoke too, "Poseidon, king of Men". Then more of them appeared, wandering through the sea as if it were a small puddle.

What happened next, I cannot explain. My head filled with delusion and went foggy. The next thing I know, I am here with people telling me stories that I was found mad and blithering on a beach on an island many miles offshore, starving and almost dead. They would not believe me, or my story, and locked me away in *here*, Blackwood Sanatorium, to rot away with the insane. My captain and fellow crewmates have yet to be found, I suspect they never will. Please use my story as a lesson to not go looking for things that hate to be uncovered.

Isaiah Burkholder
Hays High School
10th Grade, 2nd Place

Kingdoms Divided

I sit beside my father, anxiously waiting for King Nathaniel, the king of Evergreen, to arrive. Over a month ago, a locket was discovered in the land in between our kingdoms. (The land had been decided upon to be shared between the Kingdom of East-shore and the Kingdom of Evergreen.) Usually, a meeting like this would excite me, but recently tensions have been high. So far, neither kingdom has been able to decide who should receive the locket. At first no one thought much of it until the note was found. The note explained what made this seemingly normal piece of jewelry so special. The locket holds the power to live longer but warns that it can only be used once and not shared. Both kings want this power, they want to reign as long as they can.

Soon the time comes, and the Kingdom of Evergreen arrives. Princess Ava walks with her father and mother. Her blue dress perfectly matching her beautiful blue eyes. Her long, brown hair braided. Seeing her brings back so many memories, of when we were kids, or even just a few months ago. As the meeting begins, I can already tell where it's headed. King Nathaniel makes what he wants very clear. He demands the locket, giving our kingdom half of all the silver and gold they own.

"We don't want your silver, or your gold," my father says, "We just want this sorted. Give me some good reasons as to why you and your kingdom deserves the locket more." King Nathaniel is caught off guard and struggles to find a reason. The arguments go on for hours. Deals have been thrown back and forth, but nothing can be agreed upon. Things are getting heated when my father proposes something I never thought he would. A war. Whoever wins gets the locket. *There's no way he can agree to this*, I think. He, however, does. The kings shake hands and put it into writing.

That night I lay in bed thinking of what might happen to the kingdom now. What lives could be lost; what battles may be fought. I think of what I might say to my father, what we could do to prevent this. Nothing comes to mind. I know, deep down that no matter what I say, this war will happen.

I'm woken up in the morning by my father. I haven't seen him this happy since the locket was found, which makes it more eerie considering we agreed to war.

"William," he begins to say, "as you know, we have agreed to a war. Something this kingdom is yet to go through. As my one and only son, I want you to help."

"Help?" I ask, "You want me to help with the war. A war that I didn't even agree to. And how am I supposed to *help*?"

"Look, I know this is hard for you. I want you on the front lines, leading our troops. I will deal with the plans." I shake my head but agree. There's nothing I can do. The first battle is in four days. It seems I have a lot to learn.

It's been over a year since the war began. We've won and we've lost. Lost many good men. Men that had families. It doesn't get any easier. Seeing the looks on the women's faces. Their kids who won't grow up with a father. It makes me sick. No one has surrendered, and it doesn't look like anyone will anytime soon. Around the kingdom we are treated like heroes. Kids look up to us. If only they saw what was happening. War is nothing to be proud of, nothing to boast about. Some think the Kingdom of Evergreen may surrender soon, but I know they won't. Only time will tell.

As our troops line up for another battle, I feel something. A deep sadness. I think we all feel it now. The drums sound and we charge. Today we are fighting at the entrance of the cave where the locket stays. I make a run to get it but get surrounded by the enemy. I feel something hard hit the back of my head and everything goes black.

I wake up in a cell. My head is pounding like someone is beating a hammer against it. I've been captured. I try to get up, but the pain only makes me pass out again. I awake again to someone shaking me. It's someone from my army. That's when I smell smoke. I run out of my open cell to find the castle burning.

"What are you doing?!" I scream, but I get no answer. Then I remember. *Ava!* I rush into the burning castle hoping that she is safe. There is smoke everywhere and it's so hard to see. Then I hear a cough, almost like a quiet cry for help. I see her trying to find her way out. I pick her up and carry her to safety with no time to lose. Just as we are leaving, I hear cracking behind us, from what I can only assume is the collapsing of the many floors. I'm too scared to look back, too scared to see what my army may have done. I cannot believe it would ever come to this, burning down an entire kingdom, just for a locket. Finally, after running for what seems like hours, we reach the edge of Evergreen. As I lay Ava down, I see something shine in the light of the evening sun. It's the locket. Now broken and burned, it's lost all its power.

"I was trying to save it," she says, her voice cracking. "I can't believe they would do this. My home is burnt to the ground and for what? A locket?" I can feel her bitterness hit me, as I feel it too.

"We have to keep going," I say, extending my hand to help her up. As we exit Evergreen's walls we hear their army approach.

"They're looking for me," Ava says, a sadness in her voice. We run until we no longer can, hiding behind an old tree. We've reached the cliffs of the nearby mountains.

"Can I see the locket?" I ask, as she hands it over. I trace my finger around the cracks, trying to wipe the ashes from it. We both look at each other, as sadness comes over us. We both grew up there. Playing in the garden. It's crazy to think the kingdoms were so close. We don't have long before the army catches up to us. There's nothing we can do now. We both just stand there, hoping for the best, but expecting the worst.

We are soon confronted. Surrounded with nowhere to run or hide.

"Hand over the locket!" the general shouts.

"It's broken, thanks to the fire!"

"A fire your army caused," another soldier adds. I can sense their anger. I feel such remorse for actions I didn't even commit. Before I can apologize a soldier draws his bow in my direction. I watch as the arrow meant for me gets blown by the wind and hits her directly in the chest. As she's about to fall I catch her. I crouch down trying to stop the blood, but there's nothing I can do except hold her.

Grace Nelson

Hays High School

10th Grade, 3rd Place

The Longest Drive

The clouds loomed over the breath takingly beautiful plains. Rays of sunlight still beaming through the thunder heads, it was one of the most beautiful things I had seen throughout my travels.

The sun had started to set, turning the sky an array of pinks and purples. The breeze started to pick up, making the trees dance like gypsies. I snapped back into reality. I was a long way from the next point of rest with the herd. So far, we had only traveled 15 miles that day, and we still had plenty more to go. Many of the men I rode with hated the lifestyle we lived, but not me. This was my calling. I refused to settle down and have a family. The rolling hills, the summer rainstorm, and the peace of being on my horse always called to me no matter where I was. I took one more deep breath and soaked up the cool breeze before I started to pick up the pace, trying to catch up to the herd and hoping to get ahead of the rain. Since we didn't have a place to stay that was dry, getting caught in the storm was unavoidable, but I didn't mind being soaked with the solid, sweet rain.

Soon after I caught up to the herd, the drops of rain started to pitter patter onto the brim of my hat. It was as if God had seen the plains starting to die, stripping its beauty with it, and cried. The ground seemed as if it had opened to swallow every drop of the mineral filled water. The wildflowers grew a grin on their face, finally being relieved of their stresses.

The wind whipped the grass in every direction, as if it were blades of grass dancing round and round. Not many people saw the same beauty in the plains that I did, it didn't call to them like it had called to me. To the men I rode with, it looked like grass, hills, and the occasional cluster of trees, but not to me. I saw every scuff in the dirt, every broken branch, every stomped down patch of grass. All of it told me a story, no matter how small.

The thunder rolled and lightning lit up the sky. My little appaloosa mare pawed at the ground; I could tell this wasn't going to be just a little bit of rain.

As the rain grew heavier and heavier, darkness fell over us. We were only a few miles from where we had decided to stop for the night, but we couldn't see our hands in front of our faces, so we would make up the miles in the morning. The buffalo wallows had started to pool a significant amount of water, so we rounded up the herd as best as we could to let them get some water. We found a patch of trees on top of a hill, and as the rain let up a little bit, it would be the perfect spot to spend the night. From up there, you could see everything for miles and miles. The other cowboys had gone under the safety of the trees to escape the rain, but I couldn't sleep, so I offered to take the first watch. I sat upon my horse, enjoying the peace of the storm. Eventually, after the cattle had settled down an hour or two later, I decided to see what lay upon us in the morning. None of us had ever traveled this far west before, even some of the older cowboys who had done this for longer than I've been alive. The thunder that rolled in the distance told me the storm was nowhere near the end, but it didn't bother me much. Little did we know, if we had just pushed through and rode the rest of the miles tonight, we would've ended up in a little town that had

corrals, a motel, and a saloon. The stone and wood buildings with smoke coming out from the chimney was tempting, but I couldn't leave everyone wondering where I had gone. So I started back off toward the herd and observed my surroundings on the short three mile ride back. It was hard to hear with the whipping wind and the rain pounding my hat, I could hardly see without the moon to save my life. And that's almost what it cost me.

My little mare was a stubborn one, if she didn't want to do something, you weren't going to do it. She started snorting and prancing as if she was spooked. I just assumed the wine whistled and it was an unfamiliar, startling sound for her. I brought her to as much as a halt as I could and swung my leg over her to see if anything else could've been bothering her, like a cut on her leg or wet grass under her cinch. As soon as both of my feet hit the ground I knew something wasn't right. We had stopped in a large rocky valley, where it seemed as if it was a completely separate part of the world. Time stopped and sound was silenced. I reached for the pistol I kept on my left hip at all times, but before I could grasp the butt of the gun, someone grabbed my hands and covered my mouth with buffalo hide to muffle my screams. My pony screeched and bucked as someone threw their leg over her and bolted to my right. I was defenseless. I tried to thrash and kick but my efforts were worthless.

A cold flint knife was pressed against my neck and a firm grasp on my hands and with the few words that were whispered to me, I knew I was in danger.

"The less you fight, the less this will hurt." He said in what almost sounded like broken English. They were spoken in such a way that I have never heard before. The hide that had been tied around my head without me realizing it was so tight, all I could do was ever so slightly nod my head.

"You get on that horse and don't move" I nodded my head, still unable to see who had taken me captive.

A badger's leg bone and leather were the only things that were around this pony's neck. A small but stout buckskin paint stallion, only a few years old. I was thrown onto his back, and my hands were tied to his reins. He was beautiful, a thick full mane and tail with red hawk feathers braided into his mane. He had turned his head to sniff my boot and then I saw it. I remembered hearing stories about them from the saloons, though I didn't believe a word those drunkards said. He was a medicine hat stallion with a ring painted around his baby blue eyes. The rain had washed away most of the red paint, but not from his pure white face.

It was almost dawn, yet still too dark to see anything more than a foot away from my face. The man who had tied me up threw another piece of leather around the stallions' neck and started off towards the lush hills. Away from where my little mare had been taken.

Maci Vanek

Hays High School

11th Grade, 1st Place

The Tragedy

We have all heard the tale of the star-crossed lovers. We know how it ends. But what if the real tragedy of Romeo and Juliet is that no matter what the outcome, they had no chance.

The wind battered Romeo against the wall, and he paused directly beneath Juliet's balcony, breathing deeply. When the wind died down, he reached up and hauled himself over the railing, landing with a thump. Juliet sat on the balcony, hands folded on her lap, watching the moon with a blank look.

Romeo's face split into a grin. "Juliet!". Unmoving, Juliet continued watching the moon. Romeo's smile faltered.

"Why did you do it?" she asked.

Romeo slumped. "I'm sorry. It all happened so fast, and I grew so angry. I shouldn't have—"

"Shouldn't have what?" Juliet finally looked at him, her expression unchanged. "Shouldn't have killed my cousin?"

"I'm so sorry. I made a mistake. And now I must leave you. I . . . I am so sorry." Romeo stared at his hands, unsure of what else to say.

Juliet remained quiet for a moment. Then she stood and walked softly over to Romeo. She put her hand against his cheek and made him look at her.

"I know and forgive you. I love you too much not to." His face broke into a relieved smile, but Juliet hadn't finished. "And you will not be leaving me."

Romeo's brow furrowed. "Juliet, the Prince has banished me. There's nothing you or I can do."

"I know," she said again. Juliet turned and walked into her rooms. Romeo hesitated.

"Juliet if I'm caught here, banishment will be the least of my worries." He whispered after her.

"Nonsense. My Nurse is keeping watch for us. Besides, we're married now. I see no problem with you in here."

He followed her into her chambers reluctantly. Juliet approached her bed, and the large velvety red carpetbag with gold trimmings on top of it. Seeing it, Romeo realized that Juliet was dressed in traveling clothes, not a nightgown.

She turned to him, looking determined. "Friar Laurence sent me a letter. He said you were welcome in Mantua?"

Speechless, Romeo stared at her.

"Well?" Juliet asked.

Once again, Romeo grinned. "To Mantua."

Twenty Years Later

The door slammed open and the entire shack shook. Dust fell from the roof and their three pieces of dishware rattled.

Romeo stumbled into the small one shack, a bottle in his hand. The color of his ragged shirt hung and dirt and hay covered his coat. His hair had grown to his shoulders and his three-day-old stubble had crumbs in it.

"Juliet," He slurred. "Juliet, where are you?"

"Here." Juliet said. She sat staring out the window watching the people passing into Mantua. Their tiny shack sat on the edge of town and people often passed by Juliet's window on their way into town.

Even dressed in multiple layers of threadbare clothing, Juliet shivered at the wind that blew in. Taller and thinner, years of eating little and working hard had taken a toll on Juliet. Her once-blue eyes had faded to a dull gray.

"Hark! It is the east and Juliet is the sun." Romeo stumbled forward a step and laughed uproariously.

"That joke has never been funny." She said, not moving.

Romeo sat down heavily at the table. "You couldn't see a good joke if it danced in front of your little window." He took another swig from the bottle. "So, where's dinner?" he demanded.

"I didn't feel like dinner." Juliet said.

"What about me?" Romeo glared at the back of her head.

Juliet waved her hand towards the cupboards behind her. "Make something yourself."

Romeo glanced at the rickety wooden cupboards. There was a small bag of grain on the shelf, as well as a wilting basil plant. On another shelf, two plates and a cup sat next to a bunch of old carrots.

He snorted and tipped the bottle to his mouth. "So lazy." He muttered.

Juliet shot to her feet and whirled around to face him, "How dare you!"

Swallowing, Romeo replied, "After working hard all day, all I ask —"

Juliet laughed bitterly. "Working? You call working, sitting at the bar spending every spare penny I manage to scrape together?" Romeo got to his feet as well, glaring.

"By doing what? Sitting and staring? Do people come pay you to watch them? I know they don't pay to watch you. You're not that much to look at anymore."

Juliet's hands balled into fists. "What time I do not spend washing and delivering laundry, I spend running errands for people in town. I have seen you in the middle of the street, so drunk you can't see straight, spouting poetry to any woman who will deign to look at you!"

"At least they do!" Romeo shouted back.

"It's out of disgust you blind, desperate, oaf!"

"If I'm so blind, I guess you were never beautiful! Someone tell the friar that I've lied to my wife for years."

"You've lied to yourself for much longer than that," Juliet's eyes narrowed. "Those that call themselves poets have never known anything but mistruths."

"You know nothing of art," Romeo seethed.

"Neither do you!"

Romeo lunged across the table to swing at Juliet, but she was ready for it, and he was too drunk. She took a step back and Romeo fell flat onto the table. Half his drink down his front, Romeo picked himself up.

Breathing hard, they glared at each other.

"I'm going home." Juliet said.

Romeo barked a laugh. "You really think Verona will accept you back?"

"In case you've forgotten, I left of my own accord. You were the one banished, for letting your temper and emotions get the better of you. Why I didn't take that as a warning, I have no idea." Juliet marched over to another cupboard at the foot of the makeshift bed and began pulling her clothes out.

Snorting, Romeo took another gulp of alcohol. "So apparently, you're still angry about your arrogant cousin."

"Believe me, of all the arrogant fools in that city, my cousin did not rank high on the list." Juliet gritted out. Romeo ignored her.

"Sure, you can leave," he said conversationally. "It'll be nice to have good company again."

"At least we can agree on that." Juliet shoved her clothes into the bag she had arrived with. The red velvet had faded, and tassels had gone missing over the years. She had to beat some of the dust off it, but it held everything it needed to. Even as they had gotten poorer, she kept the bag to remind her of home. Now, it held her key to happiness.

She pulled her thin coat on and buttoned it up.

"If they kick you out, don't even think about coming back."

"Wouldn't dream of it." And she slammed the door closed.

As usual, the dust fell, the plates rattled, and the story of Romeo and Juliet ended in tragedy.

Loren Tervort

Hays High School

11th Grade, 2nd Place

Maya

Excitement never called to Meredith like it did to many others. The petite, homely cabin on the edge of the tiny town of Ersatz offered everything she ever wanted. Her husband Thomas provided everything she needed. He would bring fresh food from the humid, Castleton forest and books from the cozy library. In the evenings they sat by the fire in silence just ruminating in the serenity of their life. Though Thomas differentiated from Meredith, he stayed at their humble home. Thomas wanted adventures and to see the world; he would often leave for days at a time to explore the forest that surrounded their log cabin. Their small, simple life always drew Thomas back to Meredith. As long as they had each other, they stayed content.

Thomas went camping one crisp evening early in February. Although Meredith never knew where he wandered or what he did, she also never worried. As always, he left with a simple goodbye. Thomas planned to leave for three days, but those days turned into a week- then three weeks. The third week a distraught Meredith locked her door to visitors and people coming to offer her their condolences. She knew he would return. He had to return. She refused to live in a reality without him.

Two months after Thomas left, five weeks after Meredith decided to lock herself from the world, Thomas sauntered out of the woods without the slightest concern. Relief flooded her as she ran to embraced him. She questioned him where he had gone off to and why he had not returned to her sooner. Instead of responding, he simply smiled a comforting smile, kissed her cheek, and went on with his normal chores. Meredith followed him as he lit the unused wood in the baren fireplace, split wood, and brought water from the well. Because he had never spoken much, Meredith did not mind that he did not speak. That night, she prepared the wild venison and various berries and mushrooms he had returned with. They ate in silence. She sat content simply to bask in his presence. A blanket of silence covered the couple. Living in this peaceful bliss for days or months, Meredith did not care about what time had passed.

As Meredith cleaned her house and went about her daily chores, she noticed slight differences in Thomas. The woods had changed him. Other than the fact that he did not speak a word, she noticed little differences such as his slight limp and aversion to reflections. The last time she saw her reflection; she and Thomas took down the two mirrors in their tidy house. Even then, she had given no attention to the sickly woman staring back at her. Though no snow had fallen, nor a leaf turned fully green she soon grew pregnant with her and Thomas's child, their miracle. Meredith gave birth to Maya on a warm sunny day in the second week of April. Adoration for little Maya filled both the parents. Maya embodied Meredith's idea of perfection. Not a cry passed her lips, and she never broke the silence that Meredith had grown so accustomed to.

One warm, beautiful morning when Meredith's Maya had just turned one year old the family went for a stroll in the woods. Without a care in the world, the family walked happily as the golden sunlight streamed through

the slowly turning canopy leaves of leaves and pine needles. Suddenly, Meredith heard a noise. She turned to Thomas questioningly to find both he and Maya no longer there. She had not heard a single thing since Thomas had returned. A screeching bird cry pierced the silence. Coming again and again, the noise sent a shooting pain through her chest. Meredith felt as if someone had plunged a piercing blade directly into her heart. Clutching at her chest, she collapsed to the ground. The noises around her overwhelmed her ears and mind. Abruptly it grew silent, until a whisper crept through the branches-Thomas's voice. She tried to call out, but her voice grated in her throat due to what felt like years without talking. She gathered herself and looked up to a blanket of white fog that had engulfed the forest. She heard a giggle from her left- then her right. Maya. Except Maya had never made a sound. Her heart pounded as she tried to scream out for her child, her Maya. Meredith turned around and around as the fog twisted around her and the taunting laugh curled in its tendrils. Suddenly, a root caught her foot and sent her spiraling through the foliage. Roots grasped at her legs as rocks and pine needles left scratches across her body. The World blurred confusingly around her until she submerged in frigid water.

Meredith gasped surfacing from cold water that had suddenly surrounded her. She tried to swim towards the shore of the river she had fallen into, but something held her ankle. She reached down to free herself from whatever kept her from her child. She shoved the thing and kicked out but only a ring, covered in two month's worth of silt and moss, jostled loose.

She washed the ring and saw a gaunt woman who had not eaten in days staring back at her in the reflection of Thomas' wedding ring. A shallow breath slipped through her lips as she realized whose corps now anchored her to the icy grave. She smiled not with pleasure or even sorrow, rather with knowledge and expectancy. She felt the lifeless, yet familiar hand pull her into a fridge, watery embrace from her beloved. There she stayed with Thomas dreaming of her Maya, her illusion, until the air left her lungs, and she could dream no more.

Lucy Tippy
Hays High School
11th Grade, 3rd Place

And They Never Knew...

Lindsay stared at the bright red "99%" on her essay paper. The little circles stared back at her like judgy eyes. All around the classroom, her peers were loudly reacting to their own scores. She overheard a couple "Oh my gosh"-es and quite a few "Oh s***"-s. Lindsay wasn't sure how to feel about her grade. On one hand, it was better than most of the grades around her, but on the other, it could have been 100%. She had made a stupid little grammar error and gotten a stupid imperfect score which made her feel like a stupid, stupid person. Wait. Mrs. Fey wouldn't like that sentence. *She had made a careless grammatical mistake and received an undesirable, subpar score, which led her to feel utterly inadequate.* Is that better?

Riley couldn't stand it. She watched Lindsay glare at her essay, waiting for a reaction, thinking she would jump up and laugh and celebrate. Nothing. Not even a smile. It made Riley angry. She would love that kind of score on her homework. Even though Mrs. Fey assigned the essay over a week ago, basketball had consumed every free moment she had to work on it. After school, she went straight to basketball practice, then to coach basketball, then home to eat, and then outside to play basketball with her dad. Basketball. Basketball. Basketball. Riley was starting to hate the word.

"Everyone, eyes up here," Mrs. Fey called from the front. "Our next project is going to be a partner project. You have a week to create a colorful, informative, unique poster. It can be over the subject of your choice if it is school appropriate and not boring. It must clearly display your topic and present your information. I expect you to let your inner artist out and make your poster pretty and neat." I think she said something else, but the class stopped listening. Everyone began grabbing their friends and sharing funny ideas for poster topics. One of Riley's friends turned to her and started saying something about makeup brands. She tried not to roll her eyes.

From a distance, Riley and her friends appear very similar. They all play basketball and put their hair in cute, bouncy ponytails. When they're on the bench, they gossip about school, boys, teachers, and crap like that. They even received similar scores on their essays. The difference is, Riley isn't content with just getting by. Her friends are fine with being "below average," but Riley wants more out of her grades. Sometimes, she wonders if basketball keeps her from being as smart as Lindsay. Ugh. That word again.

Callie could tell Riley wasn't listening to her. She was in her own world again, like how she always gets after tests. Callie had given up trying to figure out why. While turning away from her friend, she accidentally

slammed her shin into the desk leg. Dammit. Another bruise she would have to cover up. She knew what her classmates thought of her, a silly blonde who puts her looks before everything else. That all she cares about is her makeup, her hair, and her tan. They're wrong. What they don't know is, it's not Callie who cares.

When Callie was only five years old, her mom and dad looked at her with dollar-sign eyes. Before she could even tie her shoelaces, she was put into beauty pageants. Every day of her childhood consisted of learning to do her makeup, walking in high heels, and juggling tiaras. Literally. At first, Callie thought it was cool. Her involvement made her parents happy, which made her happy. After years of the same conceited routine, Callie realized it was her cash prizes that made her parents smile. Money made them love her.

She always wondered what a supportive family felt like. When she convinced her parents to let her join basketball freshman year, she noticed how Riley's parents showed up at every game. Through all the years, they never failed to stand up and cheer for their daughter. Riley always ignored them, but Callie would do anything for support like that.

"Everybody, before you get too excited, I have assigned partners for you," Mrs. Fey yelled to the disappointed classroom. "This is an opportunity for you to collaborate with a peer you don't normally talk to. I expect creativity. Everybody understand?" She began reading her list. Callie was surprised by all the names she didn't know, specifically the one she was paired with. "Cady and Aaron, Riley and Lindsay, Callie and Janice..." *Who the heck is Janice?* Why couldn't she be paired with Riley? They could have gone to her house to make the poster. Her parents would have made cookies and said they were happy to see her. Like normal parents. Like loving parents.

Lindsay thought Riley hated her, plain and simple. When Mrs. Fey said their names as partners, they both had frozen in place. Lindsay out of fear and Riley out of who-knows-what. Maybe relief? Unfortunately, she had seen this before from Riley's clique. They get assigned with a smart person, and suddenly, they only know how to write their name on a finished project. Not to point fingers or anything, but Callie was a perfect example. Last semester, they were partnered for a lab in Chemistry (how they were in the same honors chemistry is a wonderful question). Lindsay just wanted to get the work done, but Callie was too busy applying makeup to a spot on her arm. She wasn't sure what that was about. She just knew that it happened to take exactly 82 minutes of class time.

Despite her dislike of Callie's work ethic, Lindsay couldn't help but admire her beauty. Part of her loved being smart, but the other part was a little girl yearning to be a princess. She wanted to be beautiful and lovely. But instead of doing nightly face masks, she was studying for College Algebra. Rather than going to the gym, she was doing grammar assignments. She felt awful and jealous.

Lindsay, Riley, Callie: No matter what she does, she is never happy. Does this feeling end? Will she ever be content with the person she is? Is anyone ever?

Are you?

Savannah Clingan
Hays High School
11th Grade, Honorable Mention

Henchmen with Benefits

The room was dark, save for a single bulb hanging from the ceiling, swinging slightly from the force of the door slamming shut. The hero, clad in his signature—yet, in the henchman's opinion, obnoxiously bright—red and yellow spandex suit, loomed over the captured man, cracking his knuckles ominously.

"Alright, scumbag," the hero growled, pacing in front of the restrained henchman. "You're going to tell me everything. Where's your boss hiding? What's his plan? How many more of you are out there?"

The henchman, a broad-shouldered man with a patchy five o'clock shadow, leaned back in his chair, unfazed. He smirked. "Wow. Real original. The whole 'good cop, bad cop' thing—except just bad cop. I respect the commitment."

The hero slammed a fist onto the metal table. "You'll find out soon enough that being a villain doesn't pay. You should've stayed in school, got an honest job instead of stealing from innocent people for a living."

The henchman's smirk vanished. He looked genuinely offended. "I have a *PhD* in Organic Chemistry!"

The hero blinked. "What?"

"Work an honest job, what a joke!"

"I worked at a research lab," the henchman continued, his voice rising with indignation, "trying to rewire pancreatic cells that don't produce insulin—finding a reversible cure for diabetes." He scoffed. "But guess what? My funding got cut. Because why cure a disease when you can charge people a fortune to manage it for the rest of their lives?"

The hero opened his mouth, then shut it. That was...not what he expected.

"And then," the henchman pressed on, "After me and my whole team got fired, I got an offer. A local villain needed someone with my expertise. I had a wife, kids, bills to pay—so I took the job." His smirk returned. "Best decision of my life."

The hero folded his arms. "Being a *henchman* was the best decision of your life?"

"Absolutely," the henchman said with a nod. "People act like working for a criminal mastermind is all doom and gloom, but honestly? This job is a *dream* once you look at the benefits."

The hero narrowed his eyes. "You're joking."

"Dead serious. Have you ever gotten a full dental plan? Because I do. Do you *know* how hard it is to get decent dental insurance these days? Two cleanings a year. Free cavity fillings. And—get this—orthodontics coverage. I didn't even need braces, but I got 'em anyway. Why?" he leaned in closer to the hero, "Because I *could*."

The hero groaned. "What does this have to do with—"

"Paid vacation." The henchman raised a finger. "A full month. We rotate shifts, so the whole operation doesn't go under. My buddy Carl? He's in the Bahamas *right now*. Next month, I'm off to Spain. Ever been? I hear the beaches are incredible."

The hero clenched his fists. "I *don't care* about your vacation days! I want to know where your boss is!"

The henchman chuckled. "And why would I tell you? He treats me better than *any* employer I've ever had." He leaned back in the hard metal chair he was tied to, "We have an *actual* HR department. You got a workplace dispute? Boom—conflict resolution meeting. Someone being a jerk? Sensitivity training. We get yearly reviews *with* performance bonuses. Last year, I took down two sidekicks. Know what that got me? A 10% raise."

The hero exhaled sharply, trying to keep his frustration in check. "You're telling me the same guy who—oh, I don't know—tried to *poison the city's water supply* runs a structured workplace with employee benefits?"

The henchman scoffed. "Oh, *please*. That whole thing? Exposed a corrupt private water company that was price-gouging low-income families. And guess what? After the 'incident,' the city was forced to clean it up and regulate pricing. You're *welcome*."

The hero hesitated. He *had* heard about that... but still.

The henchman, sensing doubt, pressed on. "You ever hear of a *criminal mastermind* offering *paternity leave*? Because we do! My buddy Greg? Just had twins. He got twelve weeks *fully paid*. Our boss knows childcare costs keep people stuck in poverty. So? *Free childcare*."

The hero's arms tightened across his chest. "I never got paternity leave..." he muttered under his breath.

"Exactly!" The henchman pointed at him. "Now you're getting it. You *think* you're on the right side of this, but tell me, when's the last time the so-called 'good guys' offered *hazard pay*? Because we got it. You superheroes love throwing people through walls. But *every* time I get put in the hospital? Medical bills—*covered*. Every time I get electrocuted, frozen, or teleported into the ocean? Extra stipend. If I get *disintegrated*, my family gets a *million-dollar* life insurance payout."

The hero rubbed his temples. "This is absurd."

"Oh, and retirement plans? *Phenomenal*. You put in your time, you get to walk away with full benefits. No strings attached. No forced comeback arcs."

The hero let out a strained laugh. "You expect me to believe that your employer—the same guy who robbed a bank last month—is basically running a *nonprofit organization* for criminals?"

"Bank robbery? *You mean the one that exposed an embezzlement ring* that actually stole money from the community?" The henchman smirked. "Eight CEOs are on trial because of that 'crime.'"

The hero slumped into a chair. He *had* heard about that too.

The henchman grinned. "Boss pumps money back into the community. South side of the city? No longer the poorest. Public schools? Funded! My kid's school has *new science labs*. Not to brag, but I helped pay for that—with my 'evil' paycheck."

The hero sat in silence, trying to process everything.

"You know what the real crime is?" the henchman continued. "People being so poor they have to choose between rent and food. That's why I signed up. That's why *we all* signed up. You think we're the bad guys? Nah. We just got better management."

The hero inhaled deeply and exhaled through his nose. "You do realize I'm still taking you to prison, right?"

The henchman sighed. "Yeah, I figured. But hey, *if* you ever get tired of this whole justice thing, we're always hiring! Great pay, unbeatable health benefits..."

The hero pointed at the door. "Shut up and walk."

The henchman stood up with a grin. "Hey, don't say I didn't warn you. We got *phenomenal* retirement plans too."

The hero groaned, shoving him forward. "*Just go.*"

As they walked out of the room, the henchman added, "Oh, did I mention the top-tier legal team we have?"

The hero sighed, rubbing his brows in frustration, "Of course you do."

Karley Schlautman

Hays High School

12th Grade, 1st Place

the stars are eternal

Stars littered the endless black sky above Kian. As he laid down on the rough ground – the blanket he brought doing little to cushion him – he looked at the inky darkness dotted with white. Light pollution was nonexistent here, as the nearest town was miles away. It was just him, with the stars as his only company.

Well, the stars and his thoughts. Kian wished it was just the stars keeping him company. The thoughts were an unwelcome but unavoidable guest on his excursion in the country. They were the usual: college, his job – or his lack of one – his sport, his relationship. Thoughts about his relationship were the ones that permeated his mind the most. Most of them were welcome. He loved thinking about his partner. But, of course, as always, the more he thought, the more he spiraled.

Kian always ends up spiraling. Doubts would creep into the back of his mind, ugly and unwanted. Trying to stop thinking about those doubts only made him think about them more. Kian shot up and shook his head, taking a long drink out of the Monster he brought with him. The momentary break from stargazing grounded him. Absentmindedly, Kian rubbed at his chest.

Christ, that hurts. His ribs are screaming at him in protest. Kian dropped his hand from his chest and laid down on the blanket once again, looking back at the night sky. He tried to see if he could recognize any constellations – but he could only find the Big and Little Dipper. Kian thought he found Orion's Belt, but he also saw countless stars in rows of three, so he wasn't sure. He was never good at spotting constellations anyway.

With nothing to do, his mind started wandering again. Back to his relationship. He loved his partner with all of his heart, but he was scared. He was scared that he would mess it up. He was scared he would do something and ruin it. Be too emotional. Be too annoying. Be too *not perfect*.

Kian knew he wasn't perfect. If he was, he wouldn't be like *this*. His ribs wouldn't be hurting. He wouldn't hesitate to write his name. He wouldn't feel the spike of fear and unease coil in his gut whenever religion was mentioned.

Kian had a strange relationship with religion. Living in a very religious town and not being religious yourself will do that to you. Being like *him* will do that. Kian hoped his partner didn't mind that he wasn't religious. The two of them never really spoke about it – Kian's scared to bring it up.

Kian's scared to bring up a lot of things with his partner. Does that mean their relationship is failing? Or destined to fail?

No. Kian's scared to bring up a lot of stuff with anyone. For as much as he loves to talk, he hates it at the same time. It's fine.

Right?

His phone suddenly buzzes, snapping Kian out of his thoughts. He turns on his phone, immediately seeing a reminder pop up. *Anniversary!!* A small smile creeps up on Kian's face. Six months with his partner. He shoots them a text.

Happy six months, my love! I love you so, so much!! <33 followed by a string of heart emojis. It's midnight, so Kian shuts his screen off, not expecting a response until the morning.

He brings up his arms to rest behind his head, all worries leaving him momentarily. Everything will be just fine. Kian might not be ready to tell his partner some things yet, but he will eventually. It's nothing bad, after all. It's just something he has to get off his chest. Something that requires more strength to tell than he currently has.

That's for another day, however. For now, he's perfectly content on staying here on the ground, looking up at the billions of stars twinkling above him. Everything will work out in time. And at the end of the day, if all else fails, the stars will always be here for him.

Keaton Fisher
Ellis High School
12th Grade, 2nd Place

No One Knows

No one knows I'm up here, trapped in Jupiter's orbit. What was originally supposed to be a textbook fly-by quickly turned into a sorry excuse for a mission. The moment my orbital trajectory deflected into a high elliptical orbit I knew I was likely to die here. The ship's lights had flickered out leaving me in professional panic. When they came back on, I ran a diagnostics to check my SAS system and see what happened. Funnily enough, that component had nothing to do with my abnormal orbit and.. less than ideal situation. My communication relay had malfunctioned, and I unfortunately lost contact with Earth's space communion when the power came back on, likely due to some overload in the electrical wirings.

Earth recently formed what is known as the "Earth Space Communion". Their goal is or as far as I know, was, to colonize the Sol system and make ourselves at home in all corners of our home system. The Earth Space Communion had been receiving anomalous radio readings from beyond our system, but due to the plasma and solar interference, we weren't able to determine what they were nor where they came from, leaving humanity perplexed.

Now, thirteen days and counting, adrift in this empty void, I wait to complete my first pass around Jupiter, bringing Earth back into view of my cupola. Before my ship crossed Jupiter's horizon, breaking line of sight with Earth, I saw a brief and bright glint where Earth's pale blue dot is. I can't tell if it was a strange glare from the sun, a particle hitting my cupola, or something else, but I eagerly await to get home back into my vision.

T-Minus two hours from visual of Earth

I pray that when my ship comes bearing around Jupiter, Earth will still be there. Nuclear annihilation was still a threat of course, despite the formation of the Earth Space Communion. Could that have been the reason my power malfunctioned? Who knows what kind of strange, mind-bending weapons of mass destruction humans had created. Maybe there was a terrible accident using the new planetary particle accelerator? I joked with myself that maybe some fool kicked a cigarette butt into the circuitry of that over-engineered abomination causing the entire thing to explode. Anything foolish was possible with us.

T-Minus thirty seconds from visual of Earth

As the sun bears its might across Jupiter's horizon, I anxiously await Earth monitoring my planetary analyzer. I take my eyes off the analyzer and look through the cupola. As Earth comes into view, I breathe a sigh of relief, but as more of it comes into view, I realize it's not the same Earth I had previously seen before crossing behind Jupiter. It's brighter, somewhat larger and disfigured. On the brink of a heart attack, I peek at the planetary analyzer. Earth is gone. Or at least humanity is. The planet has split into several chunks of crust and mantle. Was my ludicrous and assumptive joke a reality? Did the planetwide particle accelerator experience a cataclysmic event?

While my mind is busy racing, an alarm goes off. It's my SAS system. My orbit is actively shaping its path away from Jupiter. I check my propulsion systems. Nothing. This is beyond abnormal. Perhaps a rogue black hole has slipped into our system? I fling myself towards the cupola and peer out into the void. As my eyes scan the abyss, a metallic glint reflects off something and into my eyes temporarily blinding me. I readjust and try to make out what it is hoping that it's a Communion ship. While my ship gets closer and closer to this unidentified object, I see that it has a propulsion system, however there is no marking on the side of this ship and it bears no resemblance to any Earth-like ship. I aim my ship's analyzer at it hoping for any information. What pops into the screen leaves me speechless. This thing is massive, roughly ten thousand miles across and two thousand miles wide. At this point my ship is accelerating almost exponentially and the massive extraterrestrial ship is looming over my cupola as it begins to block out the sun. I can't help but ask myself again, do they know that I'm here?

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